

JOHN STRACHEY
ON SOME MENDIP CAVERNS AND ANTIQUITIES
IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by

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ABSTRACT

The manuscript collection of the 18th century antiquary John Strachey, now in the Somerset Record Office, is a source largely untapped in local studies. This paper prints and comments upon some extracts on caves and archaeological sites on Mendip. These include Wookey Hole, Goatchurch, caves at Cheddar, the camps at Dolebury and Burrington, and an earthwork near Priddy.

INTRODUCTION

John Strachey F.R.S. (1671-1743) is not well known, probably because so little of his work has appeared in print. He was essentially an 'observer and recorder', and it is only in recent years that he has attained local recognition as a pioneer antiquary, geologist and cartographer. Accounts of the background and achievements of this ingenious country gentleman, who lived at Sutton Court near Chew Magna in Somerset, have been published by Webby (1967) and McGarvie (1983) and include details of his printed works together with selected extracts from his extensive manuscript collection (DD/SH. 1-404) held at the Somerset Record Office. Extracts have also been used by Rendell and Rendell (1979-83) on Banwell, and by the present author (Williams, 1987) dealing with selected archaeological sites in South Avon.

Of particular local interest are a two notebooks (DD/SH. 107) compiled by Strachey after many years of historical research and fieldwork in Somerset. Strachey hoped that this would be the first step towards the publication of the first comprehensive physical and historical description of the county of Somerset. In 1736 he did publish *Somersetshire survey'd and projected* which was the first large-scale map of the county. In the same year he also published his proposals for his history which was to be known by the short title *Somersetshire Illustrated*. Unfortunately this vast enterprise did not progress further than a 'fair copy' of part of this work (DD/SH. 108), and Strachey died a few years later without fulfilling his lifelong ambition.

DESCRIPTION AND DATING OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

The two manuscript versions of the proposed *Somersetshire Illustrated* are both incomplete and seem far from ready for the printer. The first version consists of two thick notebooks (DD/SH. 107 (1-2)), containing what appears to be a rough draft made up of quarto sheets, roughly bound between semi-stiff card covers. There are no folio or page numbers and some parts have become detached. The books are divided into sections under the headings of the county hundreds and their constituent parishes. The volume DD/SH. 107 (1), with 9 sections, covers the Western Division of Somerset and the other volume, DD/SH. 107 (2), with 7 sections, deals with the Eastern Division of the county. Although originally the notes may have been written on loose sheets, or perhaps in separate sections, the books were certainly bound in their present form not earlier than 1736, as pieces cut from

Strachey's county map published in that year are bound in the volumes. These map portions are used to illustrate the text and Strachey has made several handwritten amendments on them. There are some later additions to the main text such as a marginal entry about the discovery of '3 Tesserated pavemt^s' at Wellow on the 26th June 1737.

The later version (DD/SH. 108 (1-3)), unbound and predominantly on foolscap sheets, is apparently a revised draft for *Somersetshire Illustrated*. The first part is mainly an introduction and some sheets do have folio numbers, but otherwise the manuscript is arranged under various subject headings. The other two parts comprise the drafts for just a few of the county parishes under their respective hundreds. Strachey seems to have concentrated on the areas he knew best around his country estates at Chew Magna and at Elm, near Frome. Much of the text seems to have been copied verbatim from the rough note books, which suggests that Strachey started his transcriptions in about 1736. It can be established from correspondence and historical notes in other parts of the collection, including a reference in DD/SH. 116. dated 1742, that Strachey's research was only cut short by his death at Greenwich in 1743. His letters show that he was often resident in London in his later years and Webby (1967, p. 312) records that he also lived in Edinburgh during this period, leaving the management of his Somerset estates to his son. As will be shown later, Strachey was well acquainted with local antiquities in the early 1720s, so much of the personal observations in his notes must have originated in this period.

THE EXTRACTS

Although the manuscripts contain a mass of rather dry historical detail they do provide interesting glimpses of the local landscape in the early eighteenth-century, enlivened by snippets of local folklore. The following extracts relate to some Mendip caverns and antiquities, (or field monuments as they would be known today). Where punctuation or explanations have been inserted by the present author, these have been placed in brackets; 'ye' and 'yt' have been transcribed as 'the' and 'that' but otherwise the text has been left unedited.

Wookey Hole and a Subterranean Link with Cheddar

The following extract is taken from the notebook, DD/SH. 107 (2), under the heading 'WELLS FORUM. Wokey Parish'. Part of it is reproduced in facsimile in FIG. 1.

Woky Hole is a Tything & Vill in Woky so called from the famous hole or Cave into w^{ch} you first Enter at a mouth wide Enough for 4 or 5 persons a brest w^{ch} Immediately opens to a larger Vault whence desending about 6 or 7 feet deep by Some Steps in the rock thro' a Narrow passage you proceed to a lofty room w^{ch} either thro' its height or thickness of the Air is not fully to be Viewed at the top. Especially at first Entry by the Light of the Candles You carry with You [;] they say it is 30 ft. 8 fathom further Stooping thro' a Narrow pasage much Obstructed by the Dropping & Petrefaction of the water w^{ch} in some places hath rayed Little Pyramids almost to touch others w^{ch} hang like Iceakles from the roof & discover the Several degrees of Petrefaction from the Extremityes w^{ch} are Scarce Congealed & Transperent to the old part w^{ch} is hard & Opaque [.] they make you Observe a Natural Cestern a Yard Deep always full to the brim, but so Levell that you can not persive it run over [.] this they Call the Keire [? possibly 'Kier' = a vat used for bleaching] from a white rock or petrification in it w^{ch} looks very much like froth or fermentation of Liquer [.] where the Petrefaction is so Strong that a Tobacco pipe Lying in it a fortnight will be Incrustated all Over [.] Thence the Cave Opens again to another Vault Called the Dancing room [;] Sandy & Smooth at bottom about 7 or 8 feet high but 9 Score Yards as they Affirm in Circumference Covered wth

one Intire Stone or Rocks at least I could not discover the Joynts [.] here they take up a Stone & throwing it down or firing a pistol the Echo resembles a Noise of many Cannon [.] here you might have crossed the water to a place Called the Oven [the 4th Chamber] from resembling it at the Mouth where the Water in a Sort of Well wth in this Mouth is Several fathom deep & was thought the rise of the Spring but this Passage over the Water hath been Many Years Obstructed by the falling of Some Rocks that have Bayed Back the Water. wth in the Year 1693 was so Obstructed after a great flood on Easter Munday ^[*] that for 21 Weeks they had not enough to Work the Corn mills yet no Impediment was Visible & during the time at Chedre Clives five miles dis^t they had double the Usual quantity wth plainly Shows there is a Subterraneous Communication [.] This Cave gives harbour to very fine trouts wth on every flood stock the River without, after another flood Beaumont tell us that many Cattle that fed where this Water had overflowed dyed Suddenly Supposed to be Occasioned by the Communication of this Water wth the Mineryes by Some Swallow about 2 mile dis^t In this Cave is found a very fine sand for Goldsmiths & founders use sold at 12d the bagfull & in it Batts are found hanging frō the roofs as in other Caverns [.] The length from the Mouth to the Oven afors^d 310 Yards bearing E.N.E. Wth the help of Imagination you have in the rock the resemblance of a mans head a Tomb Stone a Dogg a bigg bellyed Woman an Old Witch & flitches of Bacon & Organ pipes [.]

Wokey Hole is a Tying & Vile in Wokey so called from of famous h. i. or Cave into w^{ch} you first Enter at a mouth wide Enough for 4 or 5 persons a but w^{ch} immediately opens to a larger Vault whence descending about 6 or 7 feet deep by some Steps in of rock thro a narrow passage you proceed to a lofty room w^{ch} is rather thro its height or thickness, than it is not fully to be viewed at of top. Especially at first Enting by of light of of and by you carry with you they say it is 30 f. or fathom further Stopping thro a narrow passage much obstructed by of Dropping & Detraction of of Water w^{ch} in some places Ratt raised little Pyramids almost to touch others w^{ch} hang like Ice a hky from of roof & discover the several degrees of Detraction from of Ex tremity w^{ch} are scarce Congeals & transparent to of of part w^{ch} is Red & opaque they make you observe a Natural Cavern a 11-12 Deep always full to of brim, but so levelly of you can not give it run over. In the Bay of Hoive from a white rock of petrification in it w^{ch} look very much like froth or fermentation of liquor. & Here the Petrification is so Strong of a Tobacco pipe lying in it of feet.

FIG. 1—PART OF STRACHEY'S DESCRIPTION OF WOKEY HOLE

Reproduced by courtesy of the Somerset Record Office from DD/SH,107(2)

Wokey Hole had been described by Beaumont (1681) and there are many early accounts which have been reproduced by Shaw (1966, pp. 1–19) and others. Strachey's account seems to be based on a guided tour and was obviously written later than the floods of 1693. There is some corroboration of heavy rainfall at the time from an entry in the diary of John Evelyn (1871), which reads: '23rd April 1693. An extraordinary wet spring'. The connection with a swallet contaminated by the Priddy Minery was apparently known to Beaumont and subsequently proved during civil litigation (Hodgkinson v. Ennor, 1863) but the water flow phenomenon following the floods of 1693 remains unexplained.

*17 April according to the Old Style calendar still used in England at that time; 23 March according to the Gregorian or New Style calendar.

For many years there was a strong body of opinion that Swildon's Hole was linked with the Cheddar system and these sources were mentioned by Barrington and Stanton (1977, p. 212). Ford (1963) had thought that 'Colouration might occur both at Cheddar and Wookey if the test were made when the caves were in flood' and it is possible that there are still supporters of this theory. It can be safely said that comprehensive water tracing research up to May 1977, summarized by Barrington and Stanton (1977, pp. 202-213), shows that although the catchment areas for the Wookey and Cheddar resurgences are adjacent there was no evidence that flow-lines were shared. Subsequent water tracing detailed by Stanton and Smart (1981), including 15 traces from St Cuthbert's to Wookey at all flows from flood to drought, in no way alters this conclusion.

Stanton (pers. comm.) agrees that there is no reason to believe that the Wookey and Cheddar catchment areas were linked to any significant degree and that the idea of the full flow of the River Axe being diverted to Cheddar is not possible, let alone probable. He notes that Thomas Hardy (1952) used the same notion to dramatic effect in *Our Exploits at West Poley*. Perhaps cave guides in those days too were just as inclined to tell stories that people liked to hear and Strachey was just as inclined to believe them.

Cheddar Caves and Cliffs

The following extract is taken from Notebook, DD/SH. 107 (2), under 'Winterstoke Hundred. Cheddre Parish':

Below Niland ye Ax receives another brook w^{ch} riseth out of the Stupendious Cliffs of Cheddar in Such quantity that the water presently drives 12 mills [.] these Cliffs divide the hill into a large gap leaving a narrow passage at bottom for horses [.] in there are several Caves one Call^d Long hole above 300 yards Long but narrow & troublesome to go to the end [.] another called the Hall is lofty & often an habitation for Stroling beggars. The highest rock is S^d to be 300 feet perpendicular [.] The Rocks abound wth Physick herbs, foxes & Jackdaws & Hawks w^{ch} last gave occasion to a remarkabl. storey in our fathers time of 2 persons going to take Some young hawks [.] according to Custome they fastned an Iron barr in the ground & giving the Rope a Turn round it the one let down his Companion who had an old rusty Hanger [short sword] to defend himself from the old birds who in defence of the young Strike furiously at the Assaylant who unluckily cut the rope half off over his head as he struck at the Hawks [.] in this condition not daring to be drawn up he continued hanging till his Companion fetched another Rope from the Town, but the terrors turned his hair White . . . In the Caverns aforesaid there runs no Water as at Wokey nor does it drop frô the rocks there so it & the Sparrs are not so clear [.]

Although Strachey's mention of 12 mills at Cheddar may have been based on personal observation, it was a statement that had been frequently published before. Saxton's map of Somerset (1575) has a note printed opposite Cheddar, 'This Spring driveth 12 mils w^hin one quarter of a myle of his head'. There were few such notes on the map and the phenomenon was evidently considered exceptional. The note was copied, with minor variations of spelling, in many subsequent maps and Strachey would almost certainly have seen the statement in print.

The escapade of the hawk hunters must be taken on trust but it is an amusing tale. Although the famous cliffs were an obvious attraction in Strachey's day, the caves were uninspiring and only visited out of curiosity or used by vagrants seeking shelter. Beaumont (1681) mentions only one cavern at Cheddar; he does not name it but it is clearly Long Hole, referred to by Strachey. The cave called 'the Hall' is shown on an 1872 map reproduced by Irwin (1986, p. 252) and this identifies it as Saye's Hole. Irwin also points out that it was called Cheddard Hall in a tourist guide by Green (1869) and he suggests (pers. comm.) that 'strolling beggars' probably

used most open sites in the Gorge throughout the year, though 'the Hall' would have offered the most spacious accommodation.

Lamb Leer

Under Winterstoke Hundred in East Harptree parish (DD/SH. 107 (2)) Strachey gives a rather garbled account of 'a considerable cavern at Lamb hill' [Lamb Leer], but he cites Beaumont (1681) as his source and no new facts are revealed.

Camps and Caves at Dolebury, Burrington and Elm

The following extract is taken from the notebook, DD/SH. 107 (2), under the heading 'Winterstoke Hundred. Churchill Parish':

Dolebery on the poynt of Mendip in the pth of Churchil is an Emin^l fortification Incompassed wth a single ditch cut out of the Solid Rock w^{ch} being thrown up form a double rampart [...] in old writings its called Danesbery w^{ch} shews it Originall [...] its of Oval form & the Areas ab^t 20 Acr^s is now a Warren ab^t 20E p. Añn belonging to Jo. Jones Esq of Langford. & Over ag[ain]st it in Burrington is a Square Camp said to be Brittish thõ more likely Sax[on], under this fortification is an hole or Cave called Guy hole altogether as remarkable as that at Woky but the former being near a City & this remote from any place of Entertainment is not so often visited by Travellers [...] There are in it in the Sand the Print of foxes feet & what is more Noted of some Animalls not now known [...] such Caverns have been observed und^r other fortifications particularly Mayden Cast. by Dorchest^r & Poking hole near Tedbury in Elm in this County but these were Roman & so might also this be thõ the Danes might possess themselves of it afterwards as the Saxons also did in severall places [...]

There are earlier accounts of Dolebury but Strachey seems to be the first to describe Burrington Camp. His theory that caverns were sometimes linked with nearby hill-forts is unconvincing but Strachey does show that he was prepared to examine the function and development of these landscape features.

The location and identity of Guy Hole remains elusive and no help can be obtained from Webby (1967, pp. 314–22) who reproduced part of a final draft for the introduction to *Somersetshire Illustrated* (DD/SH. 116). That manuscript is a copy, not in Strachey's hand, and contains a confusing passage about an unnamed cavern 'under Dolebery'. Webby's transcription is accurate but the original scribe left out a line from Strachey's draft (DD/SH. 108, (1), f. 37). The following extract from this contains the 'missing' line. After a marginal heading 'Caverns & Sparrs' it reads:

It is Observable that where Lead mines are there are Caverns Near them & in these Caverns the Sparrs hang like Iceakles from the roof where the Waters drop. At Wokey hole there are severall such w^{ch} dropping form a Sugar loaf at the bottom & meet the others in time w^{ch} Congeal from the top. In these the progress of the Petrefaction is Very visible the Extremity either ways being very Soft & almost or Sometimes quite Liquid & those that have been Longest still harder congealed [...] In Chedar Cleves the Caverns are Dry & the Sparrs hard & not so Transparent so also at Guy hole under Dolebery Camp. w^{ch} some will have to be artificiall tis odd in the Sand of this hole w^{ch} lies at the Bottom there are the prints of the feet of foxes & dears thõ there have been none of the last for this last Century [...]

There is evidence that Strachey knew of this cave in the early 1720s. On the 23rd July 1723 the antiquary William Stukeley (1687–1765) took an excursion to see the Stanton Drew Stone Circles, guided by his friend John Strachey. Their examination of this monument has been dealt with by McGarvie (1983, pp. 79–80, 102–104) and Williams (1987, pp. 41–42). During this visit they also discussed other local antiquities and Stukeley was quick to make use of this information in a publication of 1824:

A camp cut out of rock at Churchill with a single trench. There is a cave equal to that of Ochey-hole at Dolebury. These are from the information of Mr Strachey. (Stukeley, 1724, p. 142)

The location of the cave remains vague but there are revelations in Strachey's notebook, DD/SH. 107(2), under 'Burrington Parish in Brent cum Wrington Hundred'. In the main body of the notes is the following reference:

on the Ramp! beh[ⁱⁿ]^d 2 ditches on the Ham is a Camp or Entrenchm^t of 150 paces Sq. said to be British but rather Saxon because its report^d to be in Opposition to Dolbery or Danesbury in Churchil [.] this work on the Comb is Overlook by a rude Rock Called the Castle & to the West of this Intrenchm^t is a precipice.

Drawn in the margin is a small sketch of the Burrington camp showing three concentric rectangles with entrances on three sides. Further down the same page, after some historical notes on Langford in Burrington Parish, is the following sentence (reproduced also in FIG. 2):

Gochurch is a Cave due S. from Langford as remarkable as Woky Hole but remote frô any Great Town & therefore not so much regarded

*Gochurch is a cave due S. from Langford full of remarkable
as Woky Hole but remote frô any Great Town & therefore not
so much regarded —*

FIG. 2—ONE OF STRACHEY'S REFERENCES TO GOATCHURCH

Reproduced by courtesy of the Somerset Record Office from DD/SH.107(2)

Strachey certainly knew of a cave in the vicinity of Dolebury in 1723 and either then, or at least before 1736, he knew it by the name of Guy hole. He also seems to have heard of the name Gochurch by about 1736. As both are compared with Wookey Hole it is likely that they were alternative names for the same cave, and if so, this must be Goatchurch cave in Burrington Coombe. In the various accounts 'under' is probably not used in the literal sense but rather to indicate that the cave was in the area and possibly at a lower level, which would suit the situation of Goatchurch. From the evidence currently available the only other caves in this area open to view in Strachey's day would have been Rowberrow Cavern, which is little more than a large rock-shelter, and Foxes Hole (otherwise Plumley's Den), a very small cave in Burrington Coombe. Neither can be remotely be compared with Wookey Hole, whereas Rutter (1829, pp. 118-9) describes a cavern 'not far from Goatchurch' as extensive and intricate. William Boyd Dawkins (1865, p. 171), said that it was known locally by the name of 'Goatchurch' and (p. 173) that it had 'a most beautiful stalactitic chamber', apparently destroyed by 1867 when Knight (1915, p. 250) visited the cavern.

Strachey gives more information about Poking Hole (mentioned towards the end of one of the extracts on p. 61) in the draft for the Introduction to *Somersetshire Illustrated* (DD/SH. 108 (1), f. 37) under the section 'of Stones', which reads:

In Elm is a Cavern Called Poking Hole not a passage as some have Imagined to the Opposite fortification of Tedbury for that would have been an Immense labour to have Undermined the River w^{ch} is at least 30 [or 20?] fathom deeper than the rocks on either side but made wth hands, either for Limestone of w^{ch} it is Composed or in search after Lead or Coal the last being found but a mile from it [.]

There are several caves at Elm but as Poking Hole is said to be opposite Tedbury Camp it could be one of the Clinker Caves high up the north bank of the Mells River. This group of small caves is described by Barrington and Stanton (1977, p. 52), who say they appear to be at least partly artificial.

A Mysterious Fortification at Priddy

The following extract is taken from the notebook, DD/SH. 107 (2), under 'WELLS FORUM. Priddy'.

about $\frac{1}{2}$ a Mile S.E. from Priddy is a Square Entrenchment surrounded with Small Pits & within it are several Shallow circular Areas for Pavillions such are likewise to be seen in the fortification called Tedbury in Elm & such sorts of pits do half encompass Newbury another Square camp in Elm & makes of fortification on Solisbury Hill near Bathes-Don.

Tedbury and Newbury camps are on Strachey's estates at Elm, near Frome and have been dealt with by McGarvie (1983, pp. 86-91). The square camp near Priddy is something of a mystery, for Westbury Camp (ST 492511) does not fit the description, being almost circular and lying two miles in the wrong direction from the village. Taking Strachey's bearing and rough distance the enclosure should be found on the south-facing slopes of North Hill; and in this vicinity, on about the 900 foot contour, are two small earthwork enclosures at ST 53715136 and ST 54265109. Neither have been excavated but they are probably mediaeval stock-enclosures. A more likely location for Strachey's enclosure is the Roman lead-mining settlement near the ruins of the St. Cuthbert's Lead Works. In 1950, turf cutting in the field to the west of the Bristol Exploration Club 'Belfry' hut exposed a wide scatter of Roman sherds including Samian ware. An excavation in 1951 in that area, led by Mr E. J. Mason, revealed the corner of a room or building at ST 54175064 with associated Roman occupation material and pieces of smelted lead. A full excavation report has not been published but there is a note of the findings by Mason (1953). Mr Mason (pers. comm.) confirms that the excavated structure was in a small rectangular enclosure, measuring 80 feet by 40 feet, within a larger rectangular ditched enclosure, with sides 250 feet by 230 feet. Both these features were first recognized on an air photograph by variations in vegetation cover. Noted on the ground by Mason, within the larger enclosure, were a number of small patches of lush vegetation, some circular, probably indicating buried structural features.

Although the land has been much disturbed since Strachey's day this situation would be in keeping with his account and there is corroboration of his external features from the observations of Hawkes (1968) in the fields further to the west. After ploughing, several circular areas of dark soil, each about 30 feet in diameter were noted, with associated finds of Roman sherds, litharge and other evidence of lead and silver extraction. As there is no published record of the actual find-spots these were verified on the ground by C. J. & E. Hawkes in 1986 as being at ST 54065076; ST 54145082; ST 54175079 and ST 54205086. The extent of Roman activities in the area, which extend from Stock Hill to the Roman building near Swildon's Hole, have been summarized by Tratman (1971). There can be no doubt that this settlement, recognized by Strachey over 250 years ago, will require further detailed examination if the Roman lead-mining industry on Mendip is to be fully understood.

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