

THE DISCOVERY OF WHITE SPOT CAVE, CHÈDDAR, IN 1887

by

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ABSTRACT

A previously unknown account of the discovery of White Spot Cave in 1887 is printed, with a letter from Boyd Dawkins.

The cave now known as White Spot Cave or Priddy Hole Slitter was discovered by Richard Cox Gough in 1887, the same year in which he entered the '1888 chambers' in Gough's Old Cave. The year of its discovery has previously been given only as 'about 1880' (Barrington and Stanton, 1977).

The discovery of 'a Monster Cavern . . . of inestimable value' was first announced in the *Weston-super-Mare Mercury* of 7 May 1887. More details were given in the same paper on 11 June:

THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW CAVE—Mr. R. Cox Gough has kindly furnished us with the following particulars . . . the discovery of a new cavern near Windcliffe Rocks . . . He [Gough] says:— . . . I discovered a very grand cave, above the "Wind Rock", under the following circumstances. About eight or nine months ago, one of my sons [Arthur] called my attention to a hole in the rocks (frequented by daws during the breeding season), and expressed an opinion that a cave was there. I examined the place more than once and felt convinced he was right and having obtained the consent of the Marquess of Bath's stewards to blast the rocks to ascertain if such was the case, I commenced operations on the 24th [April], and on the 28th had blasted through seven feet of solid rock and enlarged the hole, through which with great difficulty I crawled, and then dragged my son Arthur after me. Before doing so I took what proved to be a wise precaution, and had the tools handed to me. We then lighted two pieces of wax candle, and I took the lead, armed with a borer, and my son with a hammer, not knowing what there might be . . . We then proceeded 130 yards in a straight direction. The roof we could scarcely see; the height was so great that for 60 or 70 yards we could not see the top, and the lowest part of the roof was at least 50 or 60ft. high. The sides of the cave are very beautifully decorated with stalagmite. There are other chambers besides the one I have described, unexplored. I know of two I have not entered, only looked into them, and am fully persuaded by sound etc., that there is another chamber of large dimensions at the end of the part we traversed, which will not require a large amount of labour to get at. When we got to the distance of 130 yards, my son calling my attention to the length of our candles, as well he did, for I was so interested with what I saw I had not observed how short they were. We therefore lost no time in beating a hasty retreat, and by the time we reached the entrance my son's candle was less than half an inch in length. I then tried, by way of experiment, to get out of the hole I got in at, but found it impossible, so we set to work with sledge and bar, and after working for nearly an hour, left the beauties and grandeur of the mammoth cave for those of the Cheddar Cliffs. I have since enlarged the opening to the cave so much that I have shown it to nearly 100 persons since then including the Rev. Preb. Coleman (vicar), Messrs A. E. Bragg, Wm King, Wm Small, Roland Pavey, E. Cooter etc., and all pronounce it to be "the cave of caves."

Familiar names are found in the list; William King was the owner of the lime kiln below Lion Rock; Roland Pavey was of Pavey's Cave fame (Irwin, 1987); A. E. Bragg was proprietor of the Cliff Hotel and William Small was a local farmer. The mention of additional chambers may have been a result of a vivid imagination but should be checked by excavations as the cave is rarely visited by cavers today. Though first called Monster Cavern, it became known as the Fissure Cave or Great Rift Cavern and was photographed by Bamforth c. 1904 (Baker & Balch, 1907, p. 93).

Two months later the *Weston-super-Mare Mercury* of 6 August published a further report on the Monster Cavern:

GOUGH'S LATEST DISCOVERY—Last week the newly discovered Stalactite Cavern, entered near the Wind Cliff was inspected by several members of the Archaeological Society including Professor Boyd Dawkins, who has since forwarded the enterprising explorer (Mr. Cox Gough) an interesting letter:

Woodhunt, Fallowfield, Manchester.
2nd. August 1887

Dear Mr. Gough

I write to convey to you my great pleasure in having visited your most interesting caves, and have examined the valuable collection of fossil bones illustrating the former condition of this country, and the human bones testifying to the ancient inhabitants of the Stone Age, and last though not least, the singular place of refuge, with Roman pottery, which was inhabited sometime in the 5th, 6th or seventh centuries, must be mentioned. This cave should be carefully explored—

I am,
Yours truly
W. Boyd Dawkins

Dawkins (1889) visited other caves as well as the Monster Cavern on this occasion and it must be in these others, such as Gough's Cave and the Long Hole, that he saw the archaeological material. The cave whose careful exploration he encouraged is probably Long Hole.

Similar reports to those quoted above are to be found in the *Weston-super-Mare Gazette* of 4 June and 27 August, 1887, respectively.

In the following year the cave was visited by members of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club, on 17 May 1888 (Lucy, 1890, p. 310):

A large cave, which has recently been discovered by Mr Gough, and named the 'Fissure Cave,' was examined by the aid of petroleum lamps; and it was generally thought that it would be found to lead to another cave which Mr Gough hopes in due time to explore.

Acknowledgement

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