

AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE WYE VALLEY, 1993

by

R.N.E. BARTON

ABSTRACT

In 1993, the Wye Valley Caves Project undertook an exploratory season of survey and trial excavations in a series of caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley Gorge, near Monmouth. Initial finds have included material of Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Bronze Age and Romano-British dates. Future work is intended to include the development of new methods of small scale survey, and to focus on the relationship between the functional use of caves and their location in the landscape.

INTRODUCTION

A first exploratory season of survey and trial excavation was conducted in a series of caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley between 28th June and 24th July 1993. The work, directed by the author, was organised by the Department of Archaeology, University of Wales, Lampeter, with the co-operation of the Forestry Commission. As the sites are on Forestry land and access is still being negotiated it was agreed not to publish precise details of the location of the caves at present.

The area examined occupies a 3 km stretch of the River Wye, near Monmouth, where the river cuts through sandstone and limestone bedrock to form a steep-sided gorge. These geological deposits provide caves and rock overhangs suitable for human occupation, in different places in relation to the top and base of the gorge. Two small valleys enter the gorge on either side of the river, giving access to the overlying limestone plateau. At the northern end of the gorge the valley opens out into a wide alluvial plain. The landscape therefore offers a range of settlement and site catchment areas in positions of significantly contrasting topography and geology.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The Project forms part of a wider programme of research into changing patterns of social behaviour and human use of landscape both during and after the last Ice Age. Caves and rock-shelters offer some of the best opportunities for investigating the archaeology of these periods because they act as natural repositories, accumulating deep layers of deposits over long timespans as well as providing ideal conditions for preserving fragile organic materials. As fixed points in the landscape caves were repeatedly used by humans and denning animals, though not necessarily at the same time. The reason for humans selecting particular caves rather than others is not always apparent and this new research focuses on the relationship between the functional use of caves and their spatial location in the landscape.

The specific aims of the fieldwork were fourfold:

- 1) To investigate previously undocumented caves and rockshelters in order to evaluate their potential for future research and excavation.
- 2) To obtain stratified samples of environmental and archaeological evidence relating to the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and later prehistoric periods.
- 3) To collect survey data for GIS (Geographic Information Systems) analysis of human-landscape relationships, including the longer-term aim of quantifying the potential archaeological resource for future land management and conservation purposes.
- 4) To devise the most appropriate strategy of small-scale excavation and sampling in these locations to maximise knowledge whilst removing a minimum of deposit.

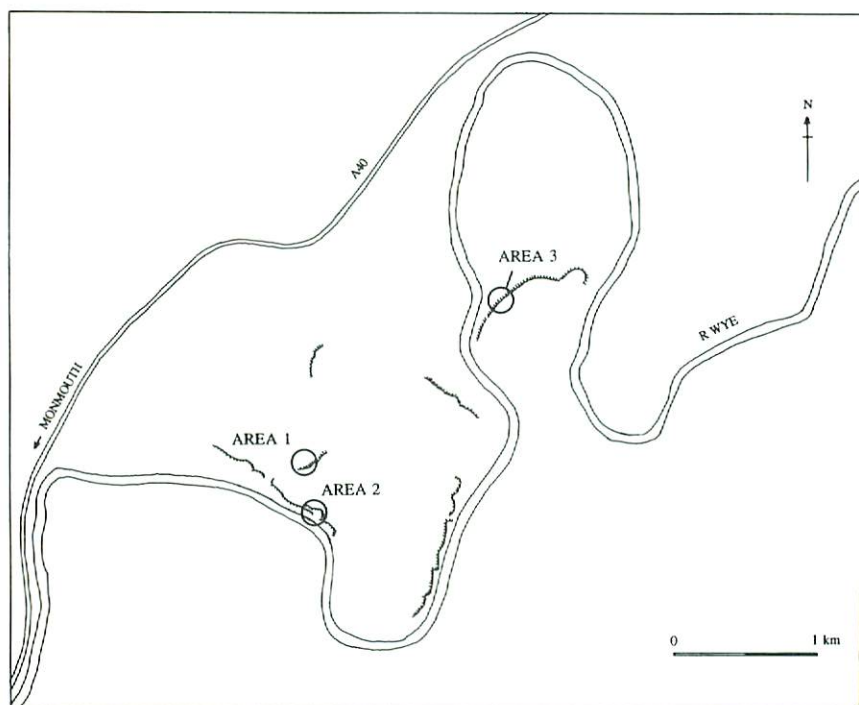


Figure 1. Location of the three survey areas in the 1993 Wye Valley Caves Project.

THE FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork was focused on three areas (Figure 1) which had previously been identified for investigation on the basis of their contrasting rockface orientation and distinctive geologies. In each case, a measured EDM (Electronic

Distance Meter) survey was made of the locations selected for examination including the adjacent rock surfaces and outlying talus deposits. This enabled any trial excavation work to be properly located and recorded as well as providing an essential point of reference for any future investigation.

In each of the locations tested, excavation was conducted by hand-trowelling and the sediments dry sieved using 4 mm and 6 mm mesh sizes. Bulk samples were also taken from most of the layers to recover small mammal, molluscan and other environmental remains by wet-sieving. All artefacts were recorded three-dimensionally and wherever possible with the EDM. The three areas examined were:

AREA 1: The upper part of the south-facing side of the main Wye Valley gorge comprises a number of prominent limestone towers, known as the Seven Sisters Rocks. In the intervening cliff-faces are a series of rockshelters and caves. One cave (Cavall's Cave) and one rockshelter (Madawg Rockshelter) were investigated by means of small-scale excavation techniques. Both sites yielded archaeological and environmental remains, covering the Late Devensian Glacial and Holocene periods.

AREA 2: A dry side valley which enters the main gorge from the north. On the west-facing side the escarpment contains a number of prominent rock overhangs and cave openings fronted by platform talus deposits. The most famous is King Arthur's Cave, a scheduled ancient monument, known for its long sequence of archaeological and environmental deposits dating back more than 30,000 years (ApSimon *et al.*, 1992). A series of 1-2 m² test pits was dug in the line of shelters north of this cave and outside the scheduled area. The rockshelters produced rich palaeontological and sedimentological data but apart from Medieval pottery they were otherwise archaeologically sterile.

AREA 3: An area of north-west facing sandstone escarpment overlooking the northern end of the gorge, where the valley opens out into a broad floodplain. Here, seven rockshelters were sampled by 1 m² test pits. Well-preserved faunal remains were recorded from two of the shelters, while one produced evidence of Mesolithic activity.

AREA 1: SURVEY AND TEST EXCAVATION

Cavall's Cave (Figure 2)

This fissure cave is located near the top of the cliff and just below the surface of the overlying limestone plateau. It has a prominent south facing entrance, measuring some 4.5 m wide and consisting of a flat, open area of nearly 16 m² from the edge of the rock overhang (dripline) back to the narrow passage at the rear. Apart from some casual excavation in 1958, which had yielded Roman pottery (S. Clark, *pers comm*), no previous work had taken place at the site. Efforts are now in hand to trace the 1958 collection from this cave.

A trial trench of 2 m² was opened under the dripline and excavated to rock floor which was reached at a depth of approximately 2.5 m. The trench was later

extended to the cave wall. From the surface of the present cave floor the deposits show the following sequence: modern trample; a thin brown humic layer; a brown clayey cave earth; a yellow clay; a basal series of banded yellow, brown and grey clay deposits. The basal series appears to represent successive fluvial and debris flow episodes (Dr. S. Colcutt, *pers comm*).

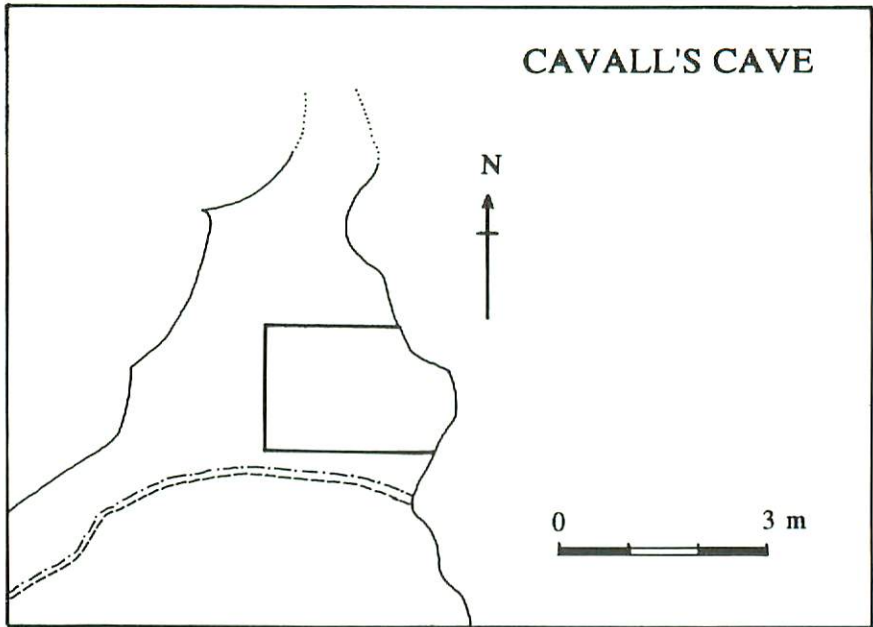


Figure 2. *Cavall's Cave.* Solid square indicates area excavated. Broken and dotted line indicates the dripline. Broken line indicates the upper edge of the talus slope, which slopes out of the cave.

Two distinct archaeological horizons separated by 10-15 cm were uncovered in the brown clayey cave earth. The upper horizon comprised faunal remains, part of a bone spatula and a scatter of large sherds of Roman Severn Valley Ware pottery including at least one tankard vessel (identified by V. Rigby, British Museum (BM)). Contained within the scatter was a coin struck in the name of Faustina II, dating to between AD 145 and 152 (identified by Dr. R. Bland, BM). Part of the 1958 excavation trench was re-located in the area of the new work and it can be shown to have cut this archaeological level. The lower archaeological horizon contains faunal remains, including non-domesticated animal species and coarser pottery of Bronze Age type.

The underlying yellow clay was found to contain Pleistocene faunal remains including horse and a rich microfaunal assemblage. These are currently being studied at the National Museum of Wales and will provide critical data on the environment and chronology of the lower layers as well as correlation with other stratified deposits elsewhere in the valley.

A survey was made of surviving deposits inside the back of the cave. The narrow passage, partly emptied by earlier mining or caving activity, appears to have been almost completely filled with the same basal deposits as those found in the lower part of the sequence at the front of the cave. No sediments of archaeological or palaeontological interest were encountered and it appears likely that the passage was inaccessible during the periods when the entrance area was being used by humans. Beyond the dripline, the talus dips away sharply out of the cave and it is most unlikely that any trace of human occupation would be found in this area.

The strategy developed to investigate this site involved sampling at the back of the cave and underneath the overhang. This has entailed the removal of no more than a quarter of the existing deposits. It is likely that it will provide a sufficiently large sample for determining the nature of occupation at this site. For this reason no further excavation work is contemplated at Cavall's Cave for the time being.

Madawg Shelter (Figure 3)

This rockshelter is approximately 30 m long and has a maximum width of 9 m and a maximum roof height of 6 m. It lies about 120 m east of Cavall's Cave and occupies a similar position with respect to the overlying plateau. The shelter is orientated almost directly west and lies on the north side of one of the Seven Sisters rocks, which provides prominent views both up and down valley. A main feature located at the rear of the shelter is a vertical rift, choked with a cemented boulder fall.

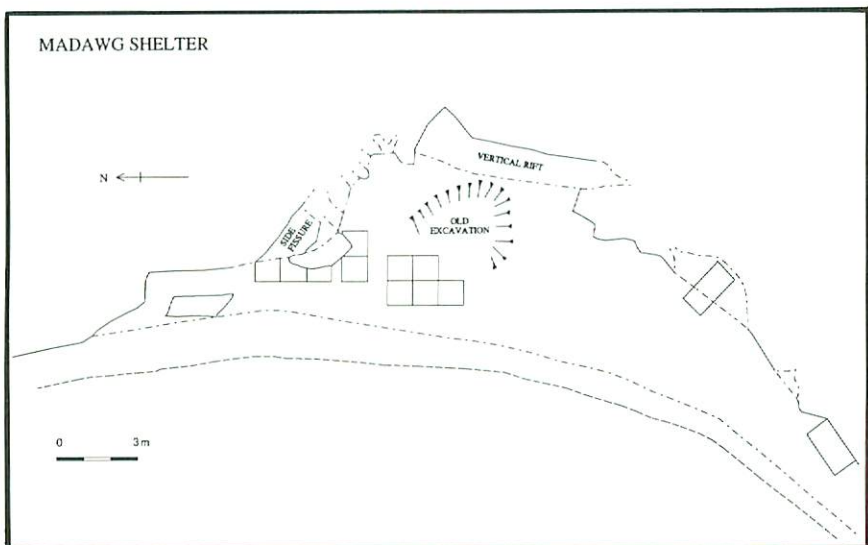


Figure 3. *Madawg Shelter (for key see Figure 2).*

The rockshelter was previously investigated in the 1920s by UBSS. A short report published by T.F. Hewer (1925) indicates finds of human skeletal material associated with the bones of pig, sheep and ox and oyster shell, made in a small fissure on the north side of the rift. A large pit made in the central back part of the shelter was dug to a depth of 10 feet (3.05 m) without reaching rock floor. No archaeological finds were reported from the pit.

In our investigation, a series of trial pits were excavated along the length of the shelter and just inside the dripline. None were excavated to rock floor. The pits near the centre of the cave revealed part of a sequence of deposits dating from the Late Glacial period but truncated near the top probably by the previous excavations. Undisturbed deposits of the upper part of the sequence, containing Mesolithic and later prehistoric finds were located in test pits at either end of the rockshelter and in the small fissure first investigated in 1925.

The upper sequence of deposits consist of a dark stoney soil overlying a light-brown/grey stoney earth, with varying amounts of tufa. Romano-British pottery, human remains and fauna were recovered from the dark stoney soil, inside the fissure. At the southern end of the shelter, a test pit produced a late 3rd century Roman coin of the emperor Carausius (identified by Dr. R. Bland, BM), in a comparable stratigraphic position. Below this level in the same pit were found large well-preserved sherds of an Early Bronze Age food vessel (identified by Dr. I.K. Longworth, BM), together with a few pieces of burnt and unburnt bone fragments. The finds occurred in a tufaceous earth close to the rock wall within a shallow natural recess. Only part of the deposit was sampled and the recess may be more extensive. At the northernmost end of the shelter, a light-brown/grey stoney earth (with no tufa) produced Late Mesolithic artefacts including microliths and very rare examples of drilled marine shell beads (cowrie and periwinkle), associated with large mammal bone fragments and charred hazelnut shells.

The lower part of the stratigraphic sequence, examined in the central part of the shelter, shows the sediments dipping steeply out of the shelter beyond the overhang. The sequence comprises from the top down, a scree with traces of cave earth grading into a loose angular scree, a brown stoney silty cave earth, a brown stoney (cemented) cave earth and a brown sandy cave earth. Only a small area was examined but amongst the stratified artefactual remains was a large Upper Palaeolithic blade segment found near the base of the scree. The underlying sediments appear to be rich in microfaunal remains and were extensively sampled for wet-sieving.

Clearly, additional work is required at this site to obtain further information on the nature, sequence and dating of the deposits. In particular, it is intended to continue the sampling of the archaeological levels discovered this year and to extend the excavation down to rock floor as well as into previously unexplored areas of the outer talus.

AREA 2: FIELDWORK

Rockface north of King Arthur's Cave (Figure 4)

A small area of limestone forming the western side of a tributary valley of the Wye was investigated. It consists of a low escarpment with a number of small cave openings and rock overhangs, and is a continuation of the same limestone block that contains King Arthur's Cave. The rock wall runs approximately north-east of King Arthur's Cave and is partially buried by deep talus slopes. Small test pits (1 m² and 2 m²) were hand dug at intervals along the rock wall in the entrances of cave openings, which had been partially exposed by animal burrowing activity, and under several of the larger overhangs.

In all, seven locations were tested and in most instances it was possible to dig the pits to rock floor. Apart from a small scatter of Medieval pottery (identified by S. Clark as Malvern Ware) near the surface of Shelter KAN/D, the rest of the test pits proved to be archaeologically sterile.

Included in the sites examined was one (KAN/E) which we were able to re-identify as Bannerman's II (No. 2) Cave where significant Pleistocene faunal collections were reported in the 19th century (Guise, 1873). Our examination showed that little remained of the original deposits outside the cave, although the possibility exists of small intact remnant patches in the interior passages.

One of the most informative test pits was at site KAN/C. This revealed a 3 m deep accumulation of talus deposits banked up against the entrance of a narrow fissure. Underlying the stoney, dark humic earth at the top of the sequence, is the following succession of deposits: a limestone scree; a large boulder fall with buff stoney silt; a red clayey silt; a second boulder fall with red clayey silt; rock floor. On-site examination of the red-clayey silt indicates it is very probably of windblown origin (S. Collcutt and D. Case, *pers comm*). This is a highly characteristic deposit which was recognised in a number of other test pits but was nowhere as thick or as extensive as at this site. The presence of microfauna (small mammals and land molluscs) in the silts and the other deposits indicates their potential for environmental studies. All the layers were extensively sampled for fine-sieving. In addition a monolith box sample was taken of the red clayey silt for soil fabric analyses and dating purposes.

The possibility of dating the red-clayey silt has important implications not just for the deposits at KAN/C but for correlating with stratigraphic deposits at other sites in the Wye Valley. It is likely, for example, that similar sediments are represented at King Arthur's Cave for which reliable chronostratigraphic information is largely lacking. A future priority will therefore be to investigate the sequence of deposits from the cave's undisturbed outer talus to obtain samples for comparative dating purposes and to provide a better contextual understanding of the existing artefactual and faunal collections from this site.

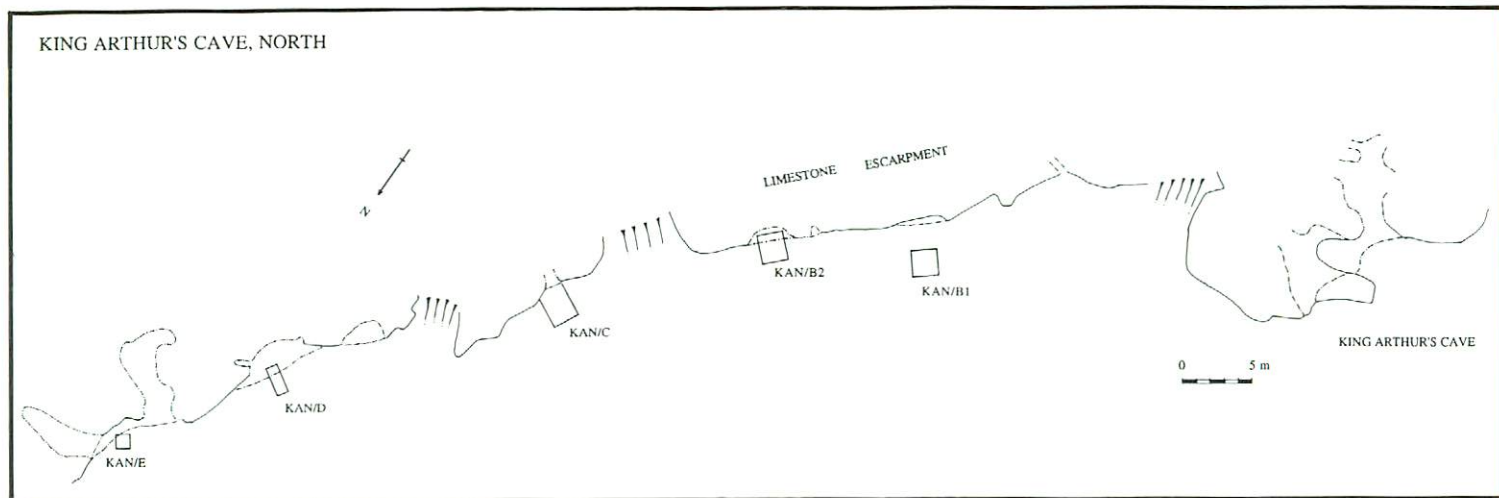


Figure 4. Line of rockshelters and cave openings north of King Arthur's Cave. Broken and dotted line indicate overhangs and cave passages.

AREA 3: HUNTSHAM HILL

The area comprises an escarpment of rock running across the upper northern slopes of Huntsham Hill. In contrast to the other areas examined, the bedrock here is made up of Tintern sandstone and quartzite conglomerate. Due to differential weaknesses in the rocks, a number of prominent overhangs have been formed. These provide a series of deep, natural rockshelters with commanding views across the northern end of the Wye Gorge and the surrounding floodplain.

Seven of the rockshelters were investigated by 1 m² test pits which were dug to rock floor. Although the sediment sequences were much shallower than in the limestone, two of the larger shelters produced flint artefacts and bone. The bone is currently being analysed at the National Museum of Wales. A narrow blade microlith from one of the sites can be dated to the Late Mesolithic period.

Further work is planned to collect larger samples of fauna and flint from these rockshelters for cultural and chronological studies.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE WYE VALLEY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

It is now abundantly clear that the previously unnoted caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley offer very considerable potential for archaeological and chronostratigraphical studies. The aim of the first season's work was to test a number of these sites with a view to considering an extended programme of survey and research excavation in this area of the Wye Valley. The initial results have amply justified our high expectations of success. Amongst the new locations examined are three sites (Cavall's Cave, Madawg shelter and Huntsham Hill 7) which between them have produced Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Bronze Age and Romano-British remains. The fact that the finds come from well-stratified contexts and are associated with faunal evidence, human skeletal material and imported marine shell ornaments indicates the exceptional richness of the archaeological record. Using this evidence it will be possible to analyse the functional nature of human activities at each of these sites in detail and in comparison to one another. The presence of microfaunal remains (birds, amphibians, fish, small mammals and land molluscs) within these deposits has important implications for examining the bio- and chronostratigraphic sequences from each of the caves and will permit both correlation between individual sites as well as detailed reconstruction of climatic and environmental changes since the last glaciation. Such studies will complement work of a similar kind already in progress elsewhere in south west Britain.

One of the aims of this work has been to develop the most appropriate and effective method of small-scale survey and excavation in order to quantify the archaeological content of caves and rockshelters in the area. Where sites have produced evidence of human occupation, it is felt that the best way to proceed is to sample these sites in contrasting depositional zones. On intuitive grounds it is possible to divide a site into three zones: the rear or side wall, under the

dripline and on the outer talus. Each is subject to different formation processes and may provide contrasting areas of cultural accumulation. By sampling a site using this transect method it is hoped to gain a realistic assessment of the human uses of these locations, and at the same time conserving a sufficient volume of deposit for future research purposes. It is therefore proposed to employ this sampling strategy in the continuing programme of fieldwork.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks must be recorded to the British Museum and the National Museum of Wales who provided personnel, equipment and grants for the first season's work. Further financial contributions were made by the Society of Antiquaries, the Prehistoric Society, the Board of Celtic Studies and the University of Wales, Lampeter through a personal research grant. Other help was provided by the loan of a caravan by the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club for which I am particularly indebted. Thanks must likewise be extended to the Forestry Commission who administer the land and to their chief archaeologist, Tim Yarnell for his assistance in obtaining the necessary permissions for the fieldwork. Gratitude is also expressed to the Coleford division of the Forestry Enterprise who gave their practical support, through the good offices of John Anderson and Martin Hobday. Valuable technical on-site advice was provided by specialists including, Simon Collcutt, Steve Clark, Elizabeth Walker, Mary Seddon, Ian Standing, Alison Roberts and David Case. Finally, I would like to thank the students of Lampeter and Peter Berridge and Ian Standing for their help in the field. Laura Sinfield and Loretta Nicolić are also gratefully acknowledged for their help in the production of the figures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- APSIMON, A.M., SMART, P.L., MACPHAIL, R., SCOTT, K. and TAYLOR, H. 1992. King Arthur's Cave, Whitchurch, Herefordshire: reassessment of a Middle and Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Beaker site. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. 19 pp. 183-249.
- GUISE, W.V. 1893. Annual Address. *Proceedings of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club*. 6 pp. 72-74.
- HEWER, T.F. 1925. First report on excavations in the Wye Valley. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. 2 pp. 147-155.

R.N.E. BARTON
 Department of Archaeology,
 University of Wales, Lampeter,
 Lampeter,
 Dyfed, SA48 7ED