

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES: WORK AT THE HYAENA DEN, WOOKEY HOLE

by

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The Hyaena Den is a wide low arch on the east side of Wookey Hole ravine. At the back of the roomy entrance chamber are a roof opening and passages extending north and south. That on the south side is now blocked by spoil from Rhinoceros Hole.

Revealed in the 1850s during construction of a mill-leat, it has been explored and collected from at many dates from 1859 up to 1970, the most recent excavations being led by the late Professor Tratman (Tratman, *et al.*, 1971). The cave became famous for the wealth of its Late Pleistocene fauna, much of it introduced by spotted hyaenas, and the very early demonstration by Dawkins (1862) that Palaeolithic stone artefacts were to be found stratified between the trampled layers of hyaena droppings.

Faced with the work of so many people over such a long span of time it seemed unlikely that any undisturbed body of sediment could survive which contained either fossil fauna or Stone Age tools. When the authors started in November 1991 the most hoped for was the odd artefact overlooked by the cave's earlier explorers, but now in a disturbed context, or scraps of fauna still trapped in floor-cracks considered too deep or too narrow to have been worth cleaning out. However, things turned out rather differently and as a result, an area of over 40 m² across the entrance and along part of the cave's south wall has been examined.

Much of this was achieved in May 1992 with the help of staff from the Quaternary Section of the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities of the British Museum. Their continued support has allowed, among many other things, a fresh plan to be made of the entrance chamber and the collection of all undisturbed sediment for fine-sieving and sorting at the Franks' House out-station of the British Museum.

The predicted disturbed deposits were found beneath a layer of clinker across the whole width of the cave, however undisturbed sediment was also isolated on both its northern and southern sides. That on the north was an elongated patch of compact orange-red subaerial cave-earth with small limestone clasts orientated approximately parallel to the rock floor and locally forming stone lines (C. Proctor, *pers comm*). Its maximum thickness was only 45 cms. At one point this was separated from the bedrock by several centimetres of water-laid yellowish silty clay.

The north front of the cave is where Dawkins (1863) records finding the greatest number of chipped pieces of flint and chert as well as charred bone. Sadly, no retouched tools were found in this cave-earth. What, however, is being recovered is the micro-debris from the working of flint and chert. The implication is that knapping and/or tool maintenance took place precisely here. The relative abundance of Carboniferous chert is of particular interest as it is the material used for several of the Middle Palaeolithic tools collected by Dawkins.

From the same sediment come many pieces of charred bone and hyaena coprolite, as well as small numbers of bones and teeth. One tooth, an incisor of red deer observed and plotted *in situ*, has clearly preserved cut-marks on the upper part of its root and the lower part of its enamel (J. Cook, *pers comm*). When these have been fully recorded, the tooth will provide an ideal and wholly unexpected, sample for accelerator radiocarbon dating.

On the south side of the cave, after encountering much disturbed material, we have found a yellowish-grey stream deposit full of small pebbles, mainly chert from the Carboniferous Limestone and quartz from the Old Red Sandstone (D.T. Donovan, *pers comm*). It is rich in fauna. The sorting of the first sediment samples by Cath Price produced, as well as large-mammal teeth and bone fragments, a surprising number of small-mammal teeth and still more surprisingly, many fish vertebrae. This is now the largest collection of Pleistocene fish from any British cave site (B. Irving, *pers comm*).

This stream deposit has, so far, only been found in the narrow space between the rock floor and an overhang of the south wall. There is, however, a very strong probability that it extends into the recently blocked south passage. Future work will be aimed at exploring this possibility, even though it may mean moving the enormous amount of spoil tipped into the cave from Rhinoceros Hole. A primary objective has now to be to reconstruct the chronological relationships between the *in situ* deposits on the north and south sides of the cave. Whether this enquiry will, eventually, lead to the reconsideration of the sediments still remaining round the roof opening remains to be seen.

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