

THE DISCOVERY OF PLUMLEY'S HOLE, BURRINGTON COMBE AND THE DEATH OF JOE PLUMLEY

by

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ABSTRACT

The tragic death of Joseph Plumley in 1875, not 1874 as often recorded, at the site of a newly discovered cave in Burrington Combe is well known. This paper examines contemporary newspaper reports recorded here for the first time in speleological literature. Important detail in these new references conflicts with later accounts which were largely based either upon the eye-witness note in a pamphlet published privately by Evan Llewellyn in 1911 or local hearsay of the 1920's. The possibility of an active stream cave, low in Burrington Combe, may offer the caver an important cave system as yet unexplored in an area where caver interest has been reawakened by the discoveries at Lionel's Hole and Pierre's Pot.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Joe Plumley's exploration of a newly discovered cave, Plumley's Hole¹ and the tragic accident that resulted in his death is well-known and does not need repeating here. Recent research has uncovered previously unrecorded contemporary newspaper accounts and a copy of the rare booklet published by Evan H. Llewellyn in 1911 which contains a short account of the tragic events at the cave. In light of this new material an in-depth reassessment of both the discovery of the cave and the accident is now possible in an attempt to separate fact from fiction.

THE SOURCES

There are three groups of information, the first may be considered primary sources being those drawn from eyewitness reports and given in local newspapers and an account by

¹ **THE SITE** : Two caves in the Burrington Combe are associated with the name Plumley, consequently the site under discussion needs to be clarified for, in the past, several writers have interchanged the names. (Baker and Balch, 1907, p.100; Balch, 1926, p.78; Balch, 1937, p.100; 1948, p.77, Ordnance Survey, 1888).

Plumley's Hole, the cave under discussion, is situated in a square alcove, opposite the Rock of Ages, at the base of an abandoned quarry face on the east side of Burrington Combe, (NGR ST 47665875). The entrance to the cave is now sealed by a concrete slab placed there in 1946.

Plumley's Den is an alternative name for Foxes Hole, (NGR ST43805821), located on the north face of the combe, 20 m above the road, and some 100 m east of the mouth of the East Twin valley. The cave was known to Prof. Boyd Dawkins as Plumley's Den in 1864 (Dawkins, 1865). The cave now has two entrances, one above the other: the lower was opened by Boyd Dawkins in 1864, the upper being too tight to enable his assistants to pass. The association with Plumley is coincidental and in this case relates to a certain John Plumley, Lord of Locking Manor. This Plumley was a supporter of the Duke of Monmouth and following the 1685 Battle of Sedgemoor was caught and later hanged at Langford. He is the subject of a legend prevailing at Burrington that he hid for a time in this cave. The name now associated with this site would make sense, for 'Den' is an alternative for 'Lair' or hide-a-way.

Recent discussion on John Plumley (or Plumley) may be found in Curtis (1973) and Plumley (1979), the authors of which cast considerable doubt on the validity of this legend and any connection with Burrington Combe. There is no family or any other association whatsoever with Joseph Plumley, the principal subject of this paper.

Evan H. Llewellyn (1911). The next are secondary accounts compiled from local, 'handed-down' information and published in speleological literature between 1926 and 1967. The third group are the surviving official documents.

Primary sources

a – Local newspapers, 1875

The previously unrecorded local newspaper accounts were published a few days after the accident. Those located by the authors are the Weston-super-Mare (WsM) Gazette for 9th January, 1875 and its competitor, the Weston Mercury, 9th January, 1875; the Wells Journal, 14th January, 1875 and the Bristol daily newspaper, the Western Daily Press, 7th January, 1875. A subsequent issue of the WsM Gazette for the 16th January, 1875 includes the only known summary of the inquest held on the 8th January, in the Burrington Schoolroom. Transcripts of these accounts are given in Appendix 1.

b – The Llewellyn account, 1911

Evan H. Llewellyn¹ published a pamphlet entitled *Burrington* (Llewellyn, 1911), a series of observations on the village which included an account of the Plumley accident. Its importance lies in the fact that he was the only eyewitness to the rescue attempt who wrote about it even though this account was only published some thirty-six years after the event.²

The Llewellyn account gives the wrong date for the events, 1874, instead of 1875. This could be disregarded as a proof reading error or a careless oversight but for the incorrect date also given for Plumley's inquest. It is possible that the author was writing from memory but there are details within the text that indicate that he was using notes of some form. The dates of the events, i.e. 5th January for the accident and 8th January for the inquest are given precisely although the latter is incorrect, for the death certificate states that the inquest was held on the day following the accident, the 6th. There is, however, sufficient detail in this account to include it within the discussion that follows.

Secondary sources

References in speleological literature dealing with this topic were based on local hearsay, or a combination of this and a transcript of one of the two texts prepared by Llewellyn. Local inhabitants who witnessed the event appear not to have been interviewed or may not have been still alive by the time this information was collected and written and so it was based upon 'second generation' informants. At least one common source merely reused material from earlier derivatives.

¹ Evan Henry Llewellyn, born 24th February, 1847; died 27th February, 1914 (WsM Mercury, 1914)

² Llewellyn's work is known to have existed in three forms (Shaw, 1972): An un-dated manuscript notebook, a version which appeared in the *Burrington Parish Magazine*, c.1910, and in a pamphlet entitled *Burrington* (1911). The Plumley account in Llewellyn's notebook was transcribed by Prof. L.S. Palmer in 1912 and a typescript copy of Palmer's manuscript was later made and lodged in the UBSS Library by E.K. Tratman. Both Llewellyn and Palmer's manuscripts are now lost. A version of the Tratman transcript was published in *The History of Mendip Caving* (Johnson, 1967). No copy of the *Burrington Parish Magazine* has been located in any library or museum in the area. This, too, is presumed lost.

The secondary accounts consulted were by Balch (1926, 1937 and 1948), Glennie (1957), Johnson (1967), Knight (1915), Palmer (1958) and Tratman (1953); these accounts have, until now, formed the basis of modern knowledge of the 1875 events.

Balch based his two accounts on local information though additional information appears to have been available for his 1937 account. On comparing the two accounts¹ the question arises as to whether Balch had actually been down the cave. Unfortunately he was not a precise writer and it is commonplace find vague statements such as 'A few years ago...' The 1926 account does not refer to his descent as he simply writes "... It is a place I should like to explore ..." which could suggest that he had not at that time descended the cave however in the 1937 text he included a definite statement that he had in fact explored the cave to a depth of 60ft during the 1890s². These seemingly contradictory statements are further compounded for Balch claimed to have obtained confirmation of the facts of the accident from Plumley's grandson. Plumley was an unmarried man. For these reasons the Balch accounts are not considered further.

Glennie's account can be discounted from further discussion as it was only a note on the confused naming of the two sites bearing the name of Plumley; he also appeared to be unaware of the earlier and detailed account by Tratman published in the BSA Cave Science series. The Knight account (1915) added no significant information to that already published by Llewellyn (1911) and similarly has been discounted from further discussion.

The Tratman paper states that the detail contained within it had been compiled from information given to him in the early 1920's when the UBSS were first active within the Burrington Combe area. He was obviously aware of the existence of the Palmer manuscript of Llewellyn's notes that lay in the UBSS Library, for the transcript that Tratman uses differs significantly from the Llewellyn published account. His account contains some detail not to be found elsewhere, further, it is important in that it contains the only detailed description of the cave, together with a discussion of the possibility that an active stream cave 150ft deep could exist at this low level in Burrington Combe and be capable of resurging at known outlet points in the area.

Johnson used a 'Llewellyn' transcript that differs from both Llewellyn's published account and Tratman's typescript, it is believed to have been based upon the now lost Palmer document, which implies that he had access to it in the middle 1960s. The differences occurring in both Johnson and Tratman transcripts should give a warning as to their accuracy and each should therefore be treated with caution. Which of the two is correct will not be

¹ The 1948 second edition of *Mendip - Its Swallet Caves ...* is identical to the 1937 edition except for minor typographical differences.

² Balch (1937, p.100 and 1948, p.77) wrote that he first visited the Burrington caves between 1890 and 1900 and continued "... Plumley's Den, ... was of course open, and I made a nearly vertical descent by one main rope for about sixty feet, landing on a horizontal rubble floor, doubtless at a higher level than that which existed when Plumley was killed. "

However, doubt must be placed on this statement for in the earlier *Caves of Mendip* (Balch, 1926, p.78) he wrote of Plumley's Den [Hole]: "... This was named by the quarrymen Plumley's Den, and for this reason. When early in last century in the process of quarrying they broke in on this vertical shaft. One of their number, named Plumley, was lowered on a rope ..." A short account of the accident followed then Balch continued "... It is a place I should like to explore, and little tackle would have been required to clear the stone choke at the bottom ... "

This latter statement can be given two interpretations. i, That Balch had not descended the cave and the 1937 (and 1948) editions merely repeated detail which he had heard from Baker or members of UBSS and then embellished the facts into the first person or ii, that he "should like to explore" meant that he would liked to have excavated the rubble choke to extend the cave. Balch could be extremely inconsistent, vague and imprecise in much of his writing, this is a classic example.

determined unless and until the missing Palmer transcript is located. Johnson offered nothing new in his general summary and so is discounted from further discussion.

Official Documents

The only relevant official documents that have been found are: a, the Census returns for 1871; b, Plumley's death certificate and, c, the Burrington parish church burial record.

THE REPORTS

Five usable accounts of the event were finally considered, Llewellyn's *Burrington*, the contemporary newspaper reports, and Tratman's much later account; but how much reliance can be placed upon them? The following discussion attempt a comparison.

The newspaper accounts warrant some discussion but some preliminary notes are first required to place their reports in context with the editorial practices employed at that time. Many local newspapers began life during the mid to late nineteenth century as a result of the population expansion that enabled the smaller towns, in the case of north Somerset the holiday resorts and established market towns, to sustain a local newspaper(s). They were small operations and employed a minimal team of reporters and typesetters, thus they depended largely upon members of the public acting as correspondents. In the case of the discovery of Plumley's Hole and the subsequent accident, the various reports, though modified to suit the available editorial space, all appear to have had the same origin for the sequence of events is identical in all respects with only differences of detail. Their common use of certain phrases also support this presumption.

With the exception of the *Western Daily Press*, the papers were published weekly, and indeed still are. Two of them collected the news items as separately headed paragraphs under the general heading of *District News* and a sub-heading, *Burrington*. The third separated the reports (see below). The reports in the three weekly papers undoubtedly came from the same source and seem to have arrived at the editorial offices of the Weston-super-Mare papers as two separate communications, the discovery of the cave and the accident. The editors coupled the two reports sequentially under two sub-paragraphs within *District News – Burrington*; except in the *Weston Mercury*. Here, the decision was taken not to reset the layout of its district news which had already incorporated the discovery of the cave under *District News – Burrington* on page 3 and so the accident account was separated and reported under a continuation of *District News – Burrington*, on page 8. The action of the *Mercury* was unusual in separating news for a particular locality and is thought to confirm the separately received reports and the late arrival of the accident information. It is also certain that the two reports were from a correspondent living locally to Burrington for in the account of the accident it stated that Joseph Plumley was (*WsM Gazette*, 9th January) “... an old inhabitant of *this* parish. ...”

The account that appeared in the *Wells Journal* a week later was identical to that in the *WsM Gazette*. There may have existed some agreement between the two newspapers for it is exactly the same report except for minor typographical differences. Normally newspapers

using competitors' material attributed the source at the end of the text but this was not done in this instance.

It is also interesting to note that both the *WsM Gazette* and *Wells Journal* removed the majority of the names from the accounts mentioning only John Clark, the tenant renting the quarry and limekiln, George White, George Clark¹ and of course Joe Plumley. The *Western Daily Press* and the *Weston Mercury* retain names of the important observers, given as Evan H. Llewellyn, a J.P.; the Reverend W.B. de Moleyns, the Burrington vicar; and Mr. Philip Light, a Burrington farmer (Kelly, 1875).

A comparison of the salient points of these accounts are given in Table 1. This outlines the principal detail of the various events; minor details are included in the discussion below.

The *Western Daily Press* account was published on Thursday, 7th January 1875. This meant that it would have had to have received the account late on Wednesday evening, which in turn means that it must have been written soon after the body was removed from the cave early in the morning. The postal services could have been used for the local midday service from the Burrington area would have been delivered in the centre of Bristol by the evening of the same day. There were three deliveries



Figure 1. *Entrance to Plumley's Hole, viewed from the West, Whitsun 1911*

Photo: J.H. Savory, by permission of the Trustees of Wells Museum

¹ George Clark's surname is spelt without an 'e' in the census returns and newspaper accounts, but with one in Llewellyn's pamphlet.

and collections per day during this period, a service maintained by the General Post Office up to the commencement of the First World War. The author of the reports is problematic. It could have been Llewellyn but the contradiction between his later account relating to Clark only descending on the morning of the 6th January seems to rule him out as the newspapers clearly report two descents by Clark, the first on the evening of the 5th. The lack of editorial space in the Western Daily Press indicates the work of a journalist producing a précis of the submitted report.

Other detail occurring in the reports seem to show the work of the editor. The original report sent by the correspondent contained much information that would have not been considered necessary for the general readership. For example most reports merely state that a rope was tied to Plumley but the Weston Mercury account retains detail that would not have been common knowledge to a journalist e.g. the fact that the rope was tied in the traditional miners style, that is around the thighs and chest creating a simple bosun's chair. The reduction of the supplied information to simple statements accounts for the variation between the newspaper reports. From this evidence it is reasonable to assume that each contains the basic elements of the narrative, delivered in accordance with the editorial emphasis. The Weston Mercury report of the accident conforms to the other accounts except for the claim that the cavern contains large chambers and passages.

The Llewellyn account needs careful consideration. Most of the statements that appear in it can be corroborated from the newspaper reports, but caution must be taken because of the inaccurate dates. This illustrates either poor or no proof checking of his final text or a complete reliance on his memory. As stated above, however, there is some evidence that he did work from notes, not least being that Palmer is said to have seen his notebook.

Each of these published accounts places a different editorial emphasis on the submitted source report, none therefore, can be considered alone as a wholly accurate account of the events but it seems that it is possible to abstract information from each of them to fill in detail within the framework outlined from the inquest report.

The inquest report that appeared in the WsM Gazette, 16th January, can be considered the best basis of any reconstruction of the overall story. This would have been recorded, by the reporter, from the spoken statements of the witnesses in the formal atmosphere of the Schoolroom soon after the events took place. The evidence for this account is also reinforced by the remarks given on the death certificate, a copy of which has been obtained. A search has been made for the original coroner's report but this has not been found and as there is no statutory requirement for these documents to be stored for any defined period of time it is believed that it no longer exists. The Somerset Record Office, at Taunton, is also of this opinion.

THE INQUEST

The inquest was held at the Burrington Schoolroom on Saturday 9th January 1875 and a verdict of Accidental Death was recorded by the Somerset Coroner, Samuel Craddock (Death Certificate, 1993). Apart from the overall detail given by Llewellyn, the WsM Gazette carried a brief report on the 16th January which recorded that Plumley was found at a depth of

70ft by George Clarke on Wednesday morning; there is no mention that Clarke had searched the cave during the previous evening.

The penultimate sentence of the WsM Gazette report included the comment :

“ ... It would seem that he had made a great effort to get back to the surface, for the body was found “doubled up,” and the rope slipped from the breast to the head. ... ”

The first statement was natural enough, but the “doubled up” position of the body is curious. If the passage was steeply descending then overhangs and minor steps in the floor of the passage would occur over which the descent would be made. The rope slipping into a fissure or notch in such an overhang might explain why Plumley could not be hauled up. The resistance of Plumley’s body against the overhang, and the powerful pull of several men on the rope, suggests that the coil of rope around Plumley’s chest was pulled up over one arm and tightened around the neck and armpit. In a desperate attempt to take the weight off the rope he probably pulled his legs up under him onto the sloping passage forming a wedge between the sloping floor and overhang.

Whatever the situation in the cave the death certificate, dated 12th January, 1875, states the cause of death to be :

“Hanging. Caused by a rope, which the deceased had fastened around his body. Shifting and fastening itself around his neck accidentally whilst descending a pit leading to a cavern in Burrington Combe.”

Joe Plumley was buried in the Burrington Parish Churchyard on Sunday, 10th January, 1875, the service being officiated by the parish vicar, Rev. W.B. Moleyns (Burial Register).

DISCUSSION

The finer detail of the events leading to the death of Joe Plumley and the retrieval of his body from the cave will never be known with certainty. The emergence of the new detail does however place the whole event in context and though more questions are raised than are answered, a clearer outline of the events is now available. The following reconstruction and discussion is based on the five sources discussed above.

Quarrying operations

The quarry in which the cave lies was then active as a source of limestone for use in the making of lime and for use as road metal. A limekiln was situated at the outer perimeter of the quarry, adjacent to the road that runs through the combe. The surrounding land, including Burrington Combe, was owned by the Duke of Cleveland and a local builder, John Clark, worked the quarry and rented the limekiln for five pounds per annum. An 1895 sale catalogue of the Wrington Estate (which included the Combe) contains a photograph of the quarry portraying a limekiln, workmen on ledges, piles of building stone and road metal, and a loaded wagon; the cave entrance is not shown (Sale Catalogue, 1895).

Plumley's Hole was discovered by quarrying mid-December, 1874 and remained unexplored until the first week of January, 1875. A local correspondent wrote to the press reporting the discovery of the cave, in January. It is puzzling why the announcement of the discovery of the cave should have been delayed so long. However, the weather conditions for the two weeks prior to the Plumley descent were severe and might provide at least a partial answer. Weather reports appeared in the *WsM Gazette* for the 2nd January 1875, which recorded a fall of eighteen inches of snow in the area. This was confirmed in a slightly later report in the *Wells Journal* for the 21st January, 1875 which recorded that Blagdon men had cleared snow drifts up to 10ft high above Blagdon and that the coldest night of the winter occurred on 31st December, 1874, when a temperature of 26° F below freezing was recorded on the Mendip Hills. During the week that Plumley made his descent, a rapid thaw had started (*WsM Gazette*, 9th January, 1875) which would have resulted in high levels of groundwater flow.

When the weather conditions eased and the thaw had begun, Plumley decided that the time was right for an inspection of the hole. George White, Fred. Wookey and James Addicott (Llewellyn's spelling) agreed to join Plumley on his venture.

The ropes used by Plumley were borrowed from a Mr. Thatcher (Llewellyn, 1911, p.22; Kelly, 1875). All except one of the reports state that a rope was tied to Plumley for protection. The *Weston Mercury* is more precise on this point for it appears that the rope was tied to Plumley's thigh and chest, in a simple bosun's chair, a common mining technique of the period. Further, Tratman recalls that the local inhabitants insisted that the descent was made using a lifeline and a handline, again this was common mining practice. Only the *WsM Gazette* and *Wells Journal* report mentions the fact that the support team "... provided him with a light, ..." It may have been thought that provision of a light was an obvious piece of kit with which to descend the cave and so the fact was omitted from the other accounts.

The *WsM Gazette* report states that the attempted descent of the cave took place during the afternoon; probably late afternoon/early evening when it was no longer possible to carry out practical work in the quarry. Plumley descended but after a while the men became alarmed, although the reason for this is not clear. One source stated they became alarmed because they could not see Plumley; another because he cried out to be pulled up; Llewellyn is particularly unclear about this. Tratman's sources said that he gave a signal on the rope. For whatever reason, the surface party attempted to pull him up. Whether they succeeded in initially pulling him back up some eight or ten yards, or whether the rope jammed immediately remains unclear. The fact remains that when they were pulling him up he could not be moved beyond a certain point.

Llewellyn gives vital detail. He was informed of the accident by his groom, Plumley's nephew, Frederick Plumley, at about "... 9 or 10 o'clock ..." in the evening. This supports the time of descent being probably in the early evening, after darkness had fallen. One cannot imagine that it would have taken Plumley more than half to one hour to reach the bottom of his descent, then another hour perhaps attempting to pull him up and another half hour for the messenger to run from the scene or from Burrington village to raise the alarm at Langford Court. Newspaper reports state that one George Clark descended the cave that evening for a distance of 20 yards but did not locate Plumley. Llewellyn arrived at the scene to find the men

still pulling at the rope but to no avail. The rescue attempt was abandoned at about midnight to be resumed the following morning.

The following morning a large gathering assembled at the cave entrance including Llewellyn, Reverend W.B. de Moleyns, Mr. P. Light, and Superintendent Gillbanks, from Axbridge, representing the police. George Clark volunteered to descent the cave to carry out a further search. He was successful and the body was soon removed from the cave.

The newspapers note that George Clark descended on two occasions, first descending 20 yards during Tuesday evening and again on Wednesday morning when he penetrated some 30 yards before finding the body. This information is in direct conflict with Llewellyn who made no reference to Clark descending the cave on Tuesday night, saying only that men were still trying to pull Plumley up the shaft. As Llewellyn makes the point of Clark's descent on Wednesday as being one of the most daring acts of bravery that he knew, it is unlikely that he would have forgotten a similar deed on the Tuesday evening, even after thirty-six years. Further, Llewellyn rewarded Clark for his courageousness. Llewellyn's comment indicates that he was not the correspondent for the newspapers. It is possible that Llewellyn did not know of the first descent for he did not arrive until sometime between 10 and midnight, when those present finally gave up hope of recovering Plumley and went home.

If Clark descended without a light then it is possible that the body was located within the twilight zone, possibly being prevented from further upward progress by the overhanging ledge with the 'V' notch that Tratman later noted. Llewellyn makes this statement relating to George Clark's Wednesday morning descent:

"... The almost perpendicular descent in the dark being made particularly dangerous by the loose stones falling as he went down. ..."

This sentence certainly suggests that Clark descended the cave without a light. If this was the case then Clark must have found the body not far from the cave entrance and within the true twilight zone. The *WsM Gazette*, 9th and 16th January 1875 [Inquest report] notes that Plumley descended about 70ft and if he had been pulled up 8 or 10 yards (24-30ft), he could well have finally jammed at about -40ft locked against a ledge

Depth of the cave

Llewellyn states that he measured the depth of the cave after Plumley's body was retrieved. Unfortunately he does not describe how the measurement was made. Tratman (1953) thought that the depth could have been considerably greater than it was when he descended in the early 1920's and that the upper part might well have been quarried away to account for the depth stated at the time of Plumley's descent, but he was assured by local inhabitants at Burrington that the cave entrance was the same as it was when Plumley descended it, and that the quarry face had not been worked again in that area. Tratman further suggested that the Llewellyn measurement was most likely carried out by letting down a measured length of (weighted ?) rope. If this was true then considerable error in the measurement could exist particularly if the weight of the rope masked a genuine bottoming of

the rope, as it could coil up at the bottom of the shaft or might “... have been carried away in the stream ...”

Tratman accepted Llewellyn’s measured depth with some suspicion but agreed that a pitch, or cave depth, of such a magnitude could exist at this low altitude of the Mendip Hills (altitude 328ft O.D.) and still allow the stream flowing at the bottom of a cave of 150 foot depth to reach the resurgence at Langford or its related risings at 130ft O.D. Rickford Rising is too high, at an altitude of 200ft.

However, the newspaper accounts offer a different perspective. If all the newspapers received the same account thus enabling the Western Daily Press to publish it on Thursday, 7th January 1875, the correspondent would have written the details of the rescue on Wednesday, 6th January, soon after the body had been retrieved, and so would have had no knowledge of Llewellyn’s depth measuring experiment that probably took place on Thursday, 7th January. The Western Daily Press report included the fact that Plumley was let down “... upwards of 70 feet.”; The WsM Gazette and Wells Journal both state that Plumley descended 40 yards (120 feet) and the WsM Mercury simply reduced the statement to “... They lowered him [Plumley] so far, that losing all sound of his voice ...”

The Mercury account is perhaps the most interesting, for the sound of someone speaking from the depth of a few tens of feet can be garbled unless spoken slowly and clearly, such that cavers have commonly used coded whistle calls on long pitches. For a man to communicate clearly from about 70 feet let alone 120 feet in narrow passages, would be difficult. Plumley reaching the point where he could no longer be heard implies that the minimum depth exceeded 50 - 60 feet.

The only first hand description of the cave is by Tratman (1953) who descended it at the time of the UBSS excavation of the site between 1919 and 1920. The descent was sufficiently steep to require a handline for the descent, the passage being influenced by the 70° dip at the site. Previous digging by the Bristol Speleological Research Society (BSRS) between 1912 and 1914 had taken the depth of the cave to about 40 feet (Shaw, 1993); Tratman wrote

“... At that time [1919-1920] one could descend not more than 40 feet on a rope. At about thirty feet the steeply sloping face down which one climbed ended in a small ledge ...”

The depth of cave was not greatly increased during this period for the UBSS only did “... a little clearing work ...”. Tratman recorded that in the early 1920’s local inhabitants had informed him that many cart loads of rubble had been poured down the shaft and eventually the upper part had been blocked by a tree stump. The use of the cave as a dumping site would explain the rather shallow depth recorded by both BSRS and UBSS. The cave in its original state could well have been twice the depth before being partially choked. Balch (1937, p.100, 1948, p.77) descended the cave during the 1890’s and estimated the depth at sixty feet.

Stream flowing in cave

Tratman records that a small hole existed below the small ledge at minus 30ft from which water could have flowed in wet conditions. At the time of Plumley’s descent, the weather had caused the sub-soils to be saturated and small streamlets could have been running

into the cave, in addition to heavy drip falling from the entrance itself. One report states that when Plumley was located his feet were dangling in a stream. This, it was believed, could have been the cause of his wanting to be hauled up. Instead of a stream flowing along the bottom of the cave it could have been emerging part of the way down and flowing down the passage, probably entering just below the location where his body was found hanging. Such a stream issuing from a hole could be cascading downwards onto his feet. It may well have been this situation that made Plumley call out to be pulled up as some reports state. There is no evidence that he reached the bottom of the cave.

Later exploration

After the accident the cave was visited by Balch, sometime between 1890 and 1900 and possibly descended by him (Balch, 1926, p.78; 1937, p.100; 1948, 77). Ernest Baker made the descent sometime between 1903 and 1906 (Balch and Baker, 1907) but makes no comment relating to the site nor describes it. Later, between 1912 to 1914, the BSRS carried out the first excavation in the cave. By that time the cave was recorded as having been partially filled with rubble and the entrance blocked by a tree stump so that following their excavation the depth of the cave was some 40ft (Shaw, 1993). The entrance was photographed by Harry Savory during Whitsun, 1911.¹

The next excavation of the site took place during 1919 and 1920, following the formation of the UBSS. The excavators were plagued by falling stones and other problems and little work was carried out, as stated above (Tratman, 1953). After the site was abandoned additional rubble was thrown into the cave by sightseers and, eventually, in 1924, the entrance was sealed by a manhole cover and an additional cover of cement. (Shaw, 1969). UBSS reopened it in 1946, for a short period of digging but no meaningful progress was achieved. The cave was again sealed with concrete (UBSS Logbook, 1946, 18th August).

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF JOE PLUMLEY

Joseph (Joe) Plumley was a labourer in the employment of George Clark and worked at the quarry. He was born, in or near Burrington, to George and Elizabeth Plumley about 1820 and when he was christened at the parish church on the 21st May, 1823, the parish record entry stated that he was three years old. Joe Plumley never married² and was still living with his parents in 1841 at The Link; the census entry states that he was employed as a labourer. At the time of the 1851 census he was still living at home, but now with his 55 year old widowed mother and his younger, sister Ruth, then 15 years old. The same situation applied for the 1861 census but at the 1871 census, four years before he died he was living alone, his

¹ Savory's three prints are in the Wells Museum collection; one is reproduced here as Figure 1. Reproductions of a second may be found in Barrington & Stanton, 1977 and Shaw, 1993. The third is in poor condition.

² Balch (1937, p.100 and 1948, p.77) relates that the story of Plumley's accident had been told him by local inhabitants at Burrington and " ... confirmed by his grandson not long ago ... "; this remark seems strange in the light of the census record.

age was given as 49, his burial record in the Burrington Parish Church burial register (Burial Register), gave his age as 54 years; the death certificate stated 55 years, either may be considered consistent with the time span since his baptism.

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APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTS OF REPORTS

Llewellyn's Account (1911)

ACCIDENT TO JOE PLUMLEY IN 1874.

Many may have heard of the accident which resulted in the death of Joe Plumley in Burrington Combe in 1874. The following is my recollection of the sad event.

George White, Fred. Wookey and James Addicott were with Joe Plumley on Tuesday the 5th January, quarrying just above the limekiln nearly opposite what has recently been christened the "Rock of Ages." It appears they discovered a hole or fissure in the rock leading pretty nearly straight down from the surface. Having borrowed ropes from Mr. Thatcher, the three men proceeded to let Joe Plumley down this hole in the rock. Plumley was a tall, handsome and heavy old man. Having lowered him a distance (I measured it next day) of 150 feet, either owing to a cry from below, or being otherwise alarmed, they began to pull him up, but unfortunately his head caught in a projecting ledge of the rock. They pulled, but to no purpose. His neck was broken probably at the first pull.

That evening about 9 or 10 o'clock, Frederick Plumley, who was at that time my groom, came hurriedly into my dining-room at the Court and told me what had happened to his uncle. On arriving at the place I found a considerable number of neighbours still at times pulling at the rope. At twelve, midnight, all hope was given up of releasing him. Early next morning we lowered George Clarke, then of Rickford, but afterwards of Butcombe, down the chasm and he found Plumley as I have described. This action of Clarke will always remain as one of the most daring and plucky actions on record. The almost perpendicular descent in the dark being made particularly dangerous by the loose stones falling as he went down. The body of Plumley was thus recovered. An inquest was held in the schoolroom on the 8th, when a verdict of Accidental Death, was returned.

A curious fact connected with Plumley's descent was that when released it is was found that his feet were in a stream of running water. This fact probably accounted for his cry to be pulled up.

Joe Plumley lived alone in a very small cottage, the remains of which can hardly now be traced amongst the thorns and briars close to the gate leading to the Combe. For days after this sad occurrence Plumley's dog, a huge and very savage animal, could not be induced to leave the cottage. I believe it died there, though many were anxious to take care of it for the old man's sake.

¹ Evan H. Llewellyn gave the twenty-eight page booklet to his game-keeper, Mr. Vaizey who eventually passed it to Miss Bathgate's mother.

Newspaper Reports, 1875

WESTERN DAILY PRESS, 7th January 1875 (page 3, column 2)

A FATAL ACCIDENT AND AN EXCITING SCENE

A shocking death occurred on Tuesday at the village of Burrington to a labouring man named Joseph Plumley. The deceased was employed at the quarry. Some time ago, when the men were blasting the rock, a deep cavern was discovered, and the deceased was anxious to descend this in order to ascertain its extent. On Tuesday, with the assistance of several men, named Adicot, Wookey, and others, he made his attempt. A rope was obtained, and it was made fast to Plumley who was let down upwards of 70 feet. It then became evident to those who were at the surface that there was something the matter, as Plumley did not go lower down, nor could they draw the rope up, and after several trials they gave up the attempt. The news soon began to spread in the neighbourhood, and several persons volunteered their assistance. Mr Llewellyn, J.P., went about ten o'clock at night, to the house of Mr. Philip Light, who sent his men with ropes to the spot. A young man named Geo. Clark was let down some 45 ft when he asked to be drawn up, evidently being too afraid to go further. It was then decided to make the attempt at daylight. Accordingly yesterday (Wednesday) morning Mr. Llewellyn, the Rev. W.B. de Moleyns, Mr. Light, and others went to the spot with ropes. Mr. George Clark again consented to go down. After descending something like eighty feet, he found the unfortunate man suspended by the rope, quite dead. It seems that the rope became entangled against a piece of projecting rock, and this, no doubt, was the cause of the poor fellow's death. The body was drawn up, and conveyed to the house of a relative some little distance from the spot. It is right to mention that Mr. Llewellyn very kindly rewarded Clark for his services.

WESTON-SUPER-MARE GAZETTE, 9th January 1875 (page 3, column 7)

and

WELLS JOURNAL, 14th January 1875 (page 6, column 3)

DISTRICT NEWS, BURRINGTON

DISCOVERY OF ANOTHER CAVE. — As many of our readers are doubtless aware, much has been said and written about the caverns in Burrington Combe, which have been visited by a number of geologists, and an opportunity is now afforded of inspecting one that has never before been explored. A few days since a man in the employ of Mr. John Clark, builder, of this place, was blasting a solid rock in the Combe for the use of the limekiln, when the explosion opened up a cavern or large fissure in the rock, the extent of which has not yet been ascertained. The only way in which any estimate of the cavern can be formed is by throwing down a stone, the sound of which can be heard for the space of three to four seconds.

FATAL MISADVENTURE. — On Tuesday a singular mishap befel Joseph Plumley, an old inhabitant of this parish, in connection with the discovery of the cavern mentioned above, by which he lost his life. Plumley, with George White and other men, were employed at a quarry and lime kiln¹ in Burrington Combe. About three weeks ago, while blasting rocks in the quarry, they discovered a large circular cavity apparently leading to a cavern which the men were curious to explore, and on Tuesday afternoon Plumley resolved to make the descent. His fellow workmen having made fast a rope to him and provided him with a light, he was let down the chasm to a distance of about forty yards, the rope being held at the mouth of the cavity by White and the other men. Plumley then called to be drawn up, and he was pulled up eight or 10 yards, when he called to the men to slacken the rope; they did so, and immediately afterwards Plumley's light was observed to be extinguished. The men shouted to him, but could get no answer, and upon trying to pull him up further found he was immovable. This caused some alarm among the men, but eventually George Clark, a labourer of Butcombe, having a rope attached to him was let down about twenty yards, when he requested to be drawn up as he could see nothing of Plumley. Clark was drawn up, and no further attempt to get out Plumley was made that night. On Wednesday morning the villagers flocked to the spot, and Clark made another descent into the chasm, this time going about thirty yards; he then discovered Plumley with his head jammed against a projecting rock, but as may be supposed life was extinct. Clark got the body clear and it was drawn up and removed to the house of his sister, with whom he resided. He was an unmarried man and aged about 55 years. Supt. Gillbanks was in attendance when the body was recovered.

¹ The Weston-super Mare Gazette and Wells Journal published identical accounts except for minor type setting detail.

WESTON MERCURY AND SOMERSETSHIRE HERALD, 9th January 1875 (page 2, column 1)

DISTRICT NEWS, BURREINGTON

DISCOVERY OF ANOTHER CAVERN. – A great deal has been said and written respecting the caverns in the Burrington Combe, which have been visited by a number of geologists, and an opportunity is now afforded of inspecting one that has never before been explored. A few days since a man in the employ of Mr. John Clark, builder, of this place, was blasting a solid rock in the Burrington Combe for the use of the limekiln, when the explosion opened up a cavern or large fissure in the rock, the extent of which has not at present been ascertained, neither can it be for a few days, until the aperture has been enlarged. At present the fissure or open space in the rock is about two feet square. The only way in which any estimate of the depth of the cavern can be formed is by throwing down a stone, the sound of which can be heard for the space of three to four seconds. It may be interesting to geologists to know that the cavern or fissure is situated in a solid mountain limestone rock, lying, as all limestone rocks do, in beds or strata. The stratum in which this fissure is situated is about ten feet wide and abuts on both sides on strata of limestone of much greater width, the stone being harder and not so well adapted for lime-burning purposes. This latter fact was the principle cause of the man Day working at the particular point.

(page 8, column 1)

DISTRICT NEWS (continued),

BURREINGTON

FATAL ACCIDENT. – In another portion of our sheet will be found an account of the discovery of a deep cavern at Burrington Coomb. On Tuesday last, a man named Plumley expressed his determination to explore the cavern, and after some persuasion, succeeded in inducing some companions to lower him down into the opening in the rocks, by means of waggon lines joined together. They lowered him so far, that losing all sound of his voice, and the light he carried becoming extinguished, they began to feel alarmed, and endeavoured to draw him up again, but found they could not do so – they could let him down any distance further, but to draw him up was impossible – although every endeavour was made so to do until night put a stop to their attempts, when – being convinced that he must be dead – they left him till the following morning, when they recommenced operations, and George Clarke volunteered to go down, who, after some time succeeded in getting the unfortunate fellow up, but only to find him dead. It appears that in some unaccountable way or other the rope which had been placed first round Plumley's thigh, and then round the chest, had become displaced and was found round his neck thereby choking him. The cavern is of immense depth and full of chambers branching off in different directions from the downward shaft, and to give a slight idea of the depth, we would add that a stone thrown down can be heard for 10 seconds in its downward course, and how much further it goes no one can tell. Mr. Llewellyn, J.P., Rev. W.B. de Moleyns, Mr. P. Light, and others were present when the body was brought to the surface, and conveyed to a relative's in the parish to await the coroner's inquest.

WESTON-SUPER-MARE GAZETTE, 16th January (page 3, column 6)

DISTRICT NEWS, BURREINGTON

THE LATE FATAL ACCIDENT IN A CAVERN. – The inquest on the body of the man Plumley, whose death in exploring a cavern in Burrington Combe we reported last week, has been held. It appeared from the evidence that on the day in question Plumley, in the presence of several men, descended a large hole which had been discovered in the quarry, and which he was anxious to explore. A rope was fastened around his body and held by some of his companions. After he had gone down about 70 feet the men found that the rope could not be lowered further nor could they pull Plumley to the surface. The body was not recovered until the following morning, when George Clark was lowered into what proved to be a large cavern, by means of another rope. It was evident that the rope by which Plumley descended became entangled in a piece of projecting rock, and thus being suspended by the rope he died before assistance could be rendered to him. It would seem that he had made a great effort to get back to the surface, for the body was found "doubled up," and the rope slipped from the breast to the head. The jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death."

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Saturday, 16th January, 1875
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Saturday, 7th March, 1914

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Table 1 - Salient points from reference sources

Source	Western Daily Press (published 7th January, 1875)	WsM Gazette / Wells Journal (published 14th January,1875)	Weston Mercury (published 9th January,1875)	Llewellyn's published account (1911)	Tratman's account (based on hearsay)
Event or action taken					
Cave Discovery					
When cave discovered	Some time ago ...	A few days since ... <i>(in Accident report)</i> About three weeks ago ...	A few days since ...	It appears they discovered a hole ...	<i>[Quotes LLeuwellyn]</i>
How cave discovered	... the men were blasting the rock ...	... was blasting a solid rock ...	... was blasting a solid rock ...	... quarrying just above the limekiln...	<i>[Quotes LLeuwellyn]</i>
Accident					
Date	... on Tuesday ...	On Tuesday ...	On Tuesday last ...	... on Tuesday the 5th January ...	<i>[Quotes LLeuwellyn]</i>
Time	<i>[not stated]</i>	... on Tuesday afternoon ...	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	
Plumley accompanied by	... Adicot, Wookey and others ...	... White and the other men ...	... inducing some companions ...	... George White, Fred Wookey and James Addicott ...	<i>[Quotes LLeuwellyn]</i>
Light given to Plumley	<i>[not stated]</i>	... provided him with a light, ...	... the light he carried ...	<i>[not stated]</i>	... the accounts make no mention ...
Lifeline	... A rope was obtained, and it was made fast to Plumley ...	... made fast a rope to him ...	... by means of waggon [sic] lines ... the rope which had been placed first round Plumley's thigh, and then round the chest ...	<i>[implied]</i>	... one tied to Plumley as a life-line ...
Depth of descent	... upwards of 70 feet. ...	... about forty yards, ...	<i>[not stated]</i>	150ft <i>[measured by Llewellyn after the event]</i>	150ft <i>[though considered doubtful]</i>
Surface men alarmed because	... as Plumley did not go lower down, nor could they draw the rope up ...	[Plumley] ... called to be drawn up ...	... losing all sound of his voice, and the light he carried becoming extinguished ...	... either owing to a cry from below, or being otherwise alarmed ...	... was pulled up, in response to his own signal ...
Pre-alarm rescue attempt	... as Plumley did not go lower down, nor could they draw the rope up, and after several trials they gave up the attempt	... began trying to pull him up further found he was immovable. ...	... endeavoured to draw him up again, ... they could let him down any distance further, but to draw him up was impossible - although every endeavour was made so to do ...	... they began to pull him up, but ... to no purpose.	... was hauled up some way before he became jammed ...
Alarm raised	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[Llewellyn informed in the] ... evening about 9 or 10 o'clock ...</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>
Time help arrived	... about ten o'clock of night ...	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>
George Clark descends (evening)	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>
George Clark descends (morning)	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[yes]</i>	<i>[yes]</i>
Named eye-witnesses	<i>Llewellyn, Rev. de Moleyns, Light plus villagers</i>	<i>Police Superintendant Gillbanks plus villagers</i>	<i>Llewellyn, Rev. de Moleyns, Light plus villagers</i>	<i>Llewellyn</i>	<i>[not stated]</i>
Inquest ¹	<i>[details not published]</i>	<i>[outline report - verdict - Accidental Death] ²</i>	<i>[details not published]</i>	... in the schoolroom on the 8th ... <i>[Verdict - Accidental Death]</i>	<i>[details not published]</i>
¹	The coroners' conclusion was entered on the Death Certificate				
²	The only newspaper that reported on the Inquest was the WsM Gazette - 16th January, 1875				