

## CAVE NOTES:

### GOUGH'S OLD CAVE, CHEDDAR (1) ORIGINS OF "JACK AND NANCY"

by

R.G.J. WILLIAMS

Much of the historical background of John and Ann Weeks, the legendary 'Jack and Nancy', who, in the mid-nineteenth century, lived next to and showed to the public the cave at Cheddar now known as Gough's Old Cave has been documented by Irwin (1986 and 1988). This note extends their family history back from their marriage in 1840 to 1770, identifying the mother of John (Jack) Weeks, who is said to have lived, with him, in the cave entrance until her death, and also explains why the family were sometimes known as Beacham or Beauchamp. The fresh information on the family ancestry was obtained from copies of the church registers of Axbridge and Cheddar held in the Somerset Record Office.

Jack's father was also named John Weeks. It is not known when or where he was born and died. He first appeared in the records when he was married at Axbridge in 1789 to a Margaret Bowden, who bore him three children before she died in 1800. Jack's mother was christened at Cheddar on the 17th of June 1770 as Suckey (a diminutive of Susannah) the daughter of John and Mary Scorce of Draycott. She was first married as Susannah Scorce at Axbridge in 1790 to William Beacham, by whom she had five children before he died, also in 1800. Susannah Beacham (widow) was married to John Weeks (widower) at Axbridge on 29th September 1802. The couple's first child, Ann Weeks, was christened at Axbridge in 1803 and buried there in 1804. They were living in Cheddar when their only other child John (Jack) Weeks was born on the 24th April 1808. Jack's wife Ann (Nancy) was born at Cheddar on the 29th July 1809, the daughter of Jeremiah and Hannah Coles. On the 8th February 1835 Jack's mother was buried at Cheddar as Suckey Weeks, aged 64. Jack and Nancy were married at Cheddar on 13th May 1840.

This information will also help in the clarification of the following matters. Irwin (1986, plate 2) published a lithograph of 1834 entitled "The Cave at Cheddar", portraying a woman seated at a washtub in the entrance chamber of the cave with a young girl at her side and surrounded by household objects including a bed. E.K. Tratman (in a letter to T.R. Shaw, dated 3rd March 1960) considered this to be of Gough's Old Cave, done with a certain amount of artistic licence. The cave could well be based on Gough's Old Cave, which in 1834 was occupied by Suckey Weeks, aged 63 and her son Jack, then aged 26.

Irwin (1988, p293) also refers to a legend circulating verbally in Cheddar "that Jack's mother originated from Banwell Abbey. She disgraced herself by marrying beneath her station and was thrown out of her home. She fled to Cheddar and is said to have lived in a cave and borne her child there". Irwin does not quote a source for this legend, but one is to be found in the notes of T.R. Shaw (1961). On the 23rd March 1961, the Reverend Ronald Denman, then the vicar of St. Andrew's Church at Cheddar, told Shaw that he had heard the following tale

from William Ernest Hill, aged 74 years, the chairman of the Cheddar Parish Council: "That at an unspecified period, the daughter of Banwell Abbey became married to or had relations with a man of comparatively low birth at Cheddar. She was thrown out from her home and the couple settled in one of the caves. There is a picture in the council offices at Cheddar showing this woman in the cave, surrounded by furniture of good quality." In conversation with Shaw on the 15th April 1961, Hill explained that he was a postman at Cheddar in the early 1900's, when he knew many of the residents of the cliff cottages. Hill said that the picture in the council offices was a copy of the lithograph print dated 1834 and that it showed "a girl, one of two or three daughters of the family at Banwell Castle or Abbey, who got into some trouble and was thrown out of her home at about 17 (years). Some time later she acquired some of her own furniture." Although Hill was unsure which figure in the picture represented the girl from Banwell he thought it might be the woman. No mention was made by either Denman or Hill of a child being born in the cave. No other source in Cheddar, Banwell or elsewhere provides any corroboration of Hill's account of the girl. She could not have originated from Banwell Castle as this was not built until the 1870's, but there is an allusion to a ninth century monastery at Banwell. Near the parish church there is a house called Banwell Abbey, which in the 18th and 19th centuries was called Banwell Court and said to be on the site of the manor house (Knight, 1902). The ancestors of Jack's mother, Suckey Scorce, were known to be living in Cheddar and Draycott from 1750 and there are still Scorce families living in Cheddar. Neither the surname Scorce nor any family connection of Jack's parents has been traced to Banwell. Hill could not have heard this tale himself until the 1890's and even in recent years it has varied in the telling. It cannot be relied upon.

## (2) CORRECTION TO THE NAME OF THE CAVE IN 1860

by

D.J. Irwin

A picture postcard printed in the early 1900's has reproduced a photograph taken in 1860 of Jack and Nancy outside their cottage with the entrance of the cave in the background (Irwin, 1988, p292, Figure 1). In a note (Irwin 1993) an original print of this photograph was discussed and the name on a sign over the entrance was interpreted as "Cheddar Cavern". Enlargements of the photograph, by Chris Howes, show that the sign board stretches across the entrance but that its left side is partially masked by foliage. There would appear to be two lines of text on the board but the words on the upper line are so faint as to be unreadable. The size of the lettering on the upper line is less than that on the lower, which is about half the height of the board. The letters that are clearly visible on the lower line to the right of the foliage are "-LACTITE CAVERN". It therefore appears that the sign would have included the words "GREAT STALACTITE CAVERN", the name that is to be found in Emmanuel Green's "The Tourist Guide to Cheddar Cliffs" published in 1869. (Irwin, 1986, pp. 255 and 265).

## REFERENCES CITED

- IRWIN, D.J., 1986. Gough's Old Cave — Its History. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **17**. pp. 250-266.
- IRWIN, D.J., 1988. 'Jack and Nancy' at Gough's Cave, Cheddar. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **18**. pp. 292-297.
- IRWIN, D.J., 1993. Cave Notes: A Photograph of Jack and Nancy Weekes. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **19**. pp. 375-376.
- KNIGHT, F.A., 1902. *The Sea-Board of Mendip*. J. M. Dent & Co., London.
- SHAW, T.R., 1961. *Daughter of Banwell Abbey [23 March 1961], and Conversations with Ernest William Hill, 15 April 1961*. In an unpublished collection of notes, letters and other documents on the caves of Mendip. Folio 454 and Folios 455-457.

R.G.J. Williams  
97, Airport Road,  
Bristol, BS14 9TD

D.J. Irwin  
Townsend Cottage,  
Priddy, Somerset, BA5 3BP