

SECOND INTERIM REPORT ON THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE WYE VALLEY, 1994.

by

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, a second season of survey and trial excavation was conducted in caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley gorge, near Monmouth, Gwent. This is part of a five-year project focusing on the relationship between the functional uses of caves and their topographic location in the landscape. In addition to continuing work at Madawg Shelter, new sites were surveyed in the Symonds Yat East area and on Little Doward Hill. Finds of final Palaeolithic, later Mesolithic and Bronze Age type are reported on.

INTRODUCTION

A second season of survey and excavation of caves and rockshelters was undertaken in the Wye Valley gorge, near Monmouth, Gwent between 25 June and 24 July 1994. The work was directed by Dr. Nick Barton, University of Wales, Lampeter, and was funded by the Board of Celtic Studies, the British Museum, the National Museum of Wales and University of Wales, Lampeter. The project received the full cooperation of the landowners, the Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust, and was undertaken with the consent of English Nature and English Heritage who administer some of the sites concerned.

FIELD AREA

The location selected for study (Figure 1) covers an area of some 30 km² and includes an estimated 30-40 caves and rockshelters. Despite previous spectacular discoveries at individual sites, such as the famous King Arthur's Cave (ApSimon *et al.*, 1992 and contained references) and Merlin's Cave (Hewer, 1925, 1926) surprisingly little is known about the numerous other caves and rockshelters in the vicinity and none of them has been systematically surveyed or investigated using modern recovery techniques. Their archaeological and palaeontological potential therefore remains virtually untapped. In order to test this potential, a systematic programme of survey of all accessible caves with sufficient remaining deposits was initiated last year. As a result of this work three new sites were identified with evidence of Roman, Bronze Age, Mesolithic and Upper Palaeolithic activity (Barton, 1993).

PROJECT AIMS

Details of the project rationale have been set out in Barton (1993). The research concerns the investigation of caves and rockshelters, particularly in relation to site function and their positioning in the local landscape. The specific aims are:

- 1) To obtain well-stratified archaeological and palaeontological samples for dating purposes and for comparative spatial and site function analyses,
- 2) To compile a computerised map database of site location.
- 3) To investigate why particular sites were used in preference to others, and how that function might have changed through time,
- 4) To quantify the archaeological resource for future land management and conservation purposes.

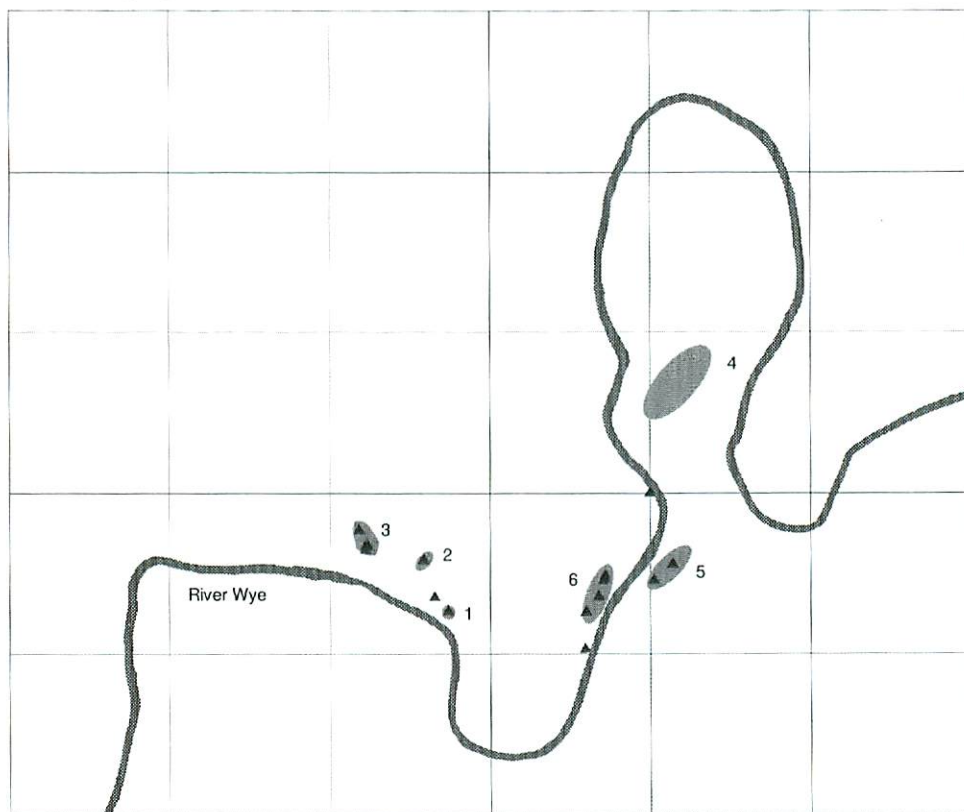


Figure 1. Map of the main areas of caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley Caves Project. Triangles indicate sites in the survey. Grid squares 1 km²

1994 FIELDWORK

Following last year's initial fieldwork, one rockshelter in Area 1 was selected for fuller scale investigation, whilst exploratory survey and test excavation work was undertaken in Areas 5 and 3 (Figure 1). Each of the sites was surveyed using EDM (Electronic Distance Meter) equipment and excavation was by means of hand-trowelling with all sediments dry-sieved using 4 mm and 6 mm mesh sizes. Bulk samples were also taken from most of the layers for wet-sieving to recover small vertebrate, molluscan and other environmental remains. All artefacts were recorded three-dimensionally, wherever possible with the EDM. The three areas examined were:

Area 5

This includes a line of caves and rockshelters on the east side of the river which have been described in Oldham and Jones (1992, 58-62). The sites are distributed along a rockface high above the river close to a prominent rock pinnacle known as the Longstone (or locally as Peartree Rock). In all five sites were examined, comprising Symonds Yat Cave No 13 (also known as Wye Rapids Cave), No 14, Nos. 16 and 17 (treated as one site), No 18 and No 21. Only one location, No 14, proved to contain evidence of prehistoric activity, the rest either had evidence of mining disturbance or were archaeologically sterile.

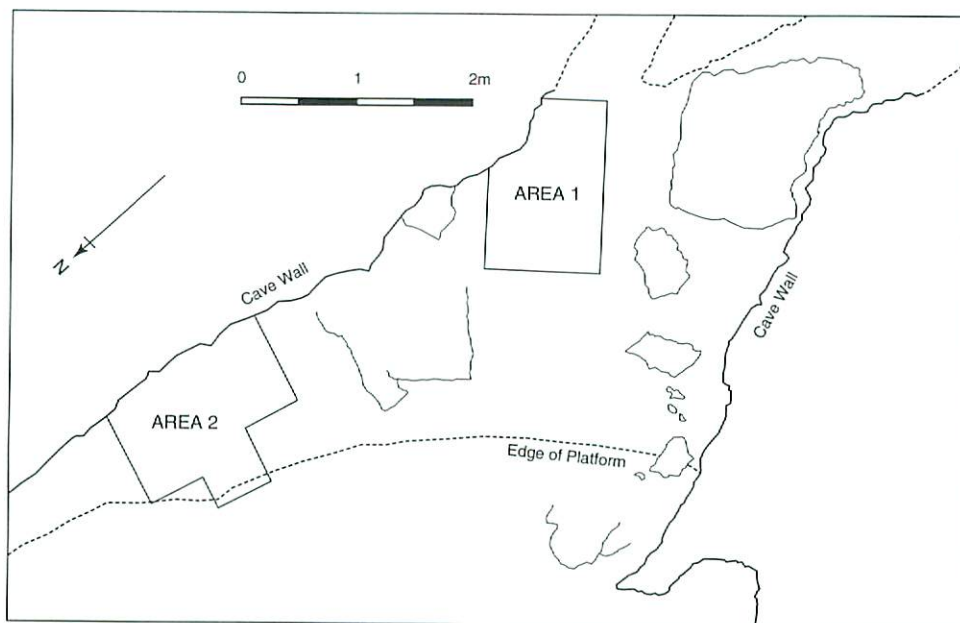


Figure 2. *Symonds Yat East Rockshelter showing the two areas examined in 1994*

Symonds Yat East Rockshelter (= SYC No 14) (NGR SO 56141550) has a very large arched entrance with a small cave leading off at the back (Fig 2). The cave has two

passages, one of which appears to have been mined (Oldham and Jones, 1992, 61). The site had previously gained notoriety as a result of the alleged discovery of cave paintings (Rogers, 1981, Rogers *et al*, 1981) but these findings were subsequently discredited by leading Palaeolithic scholars and were attributed to natural rock formations (Sieveking, 1981, 1982). Excavations undertaken by Rogers in the same rockshelter had reportedly uncovered two artefact assemblages of Middle Palaeolithic and Late Upper Palaeolithic type respectively (Rogers, 1981, p601). These claims were also later challenged by Sieveking (1982, p568) but no definite conclusions were reached on either the context or cultural attribution of the artefacts. It was partly for this reason, therefore, that renewed work in the shelter was considered desirable in order to establish the nature of the artefacts and their stratigraphic position.

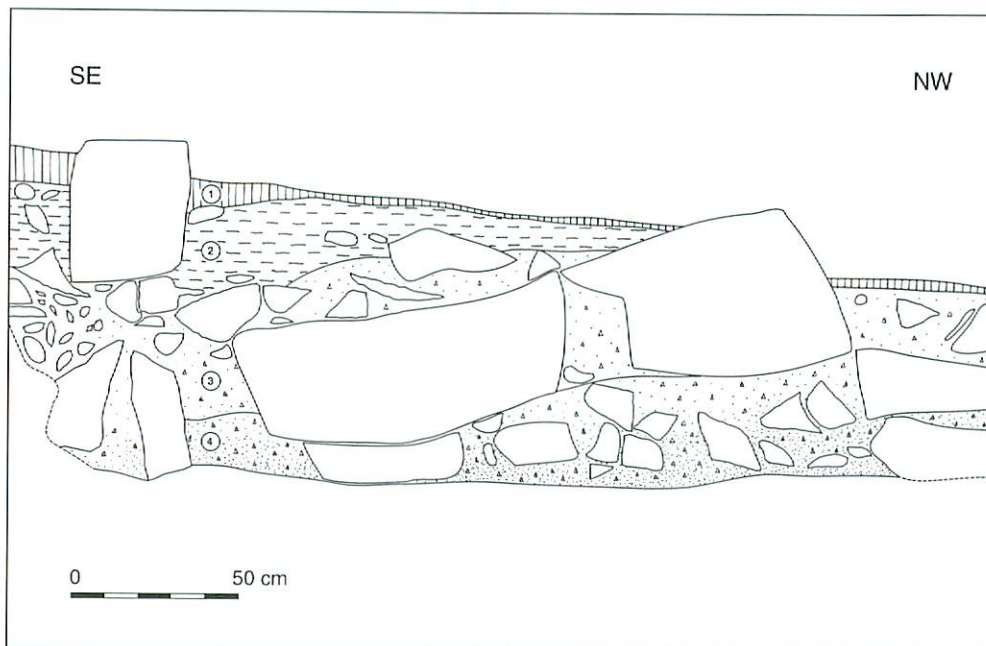
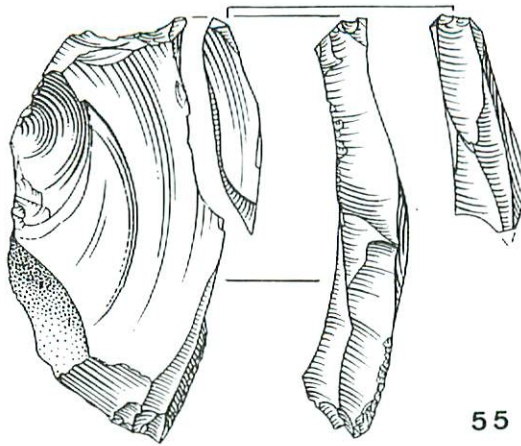


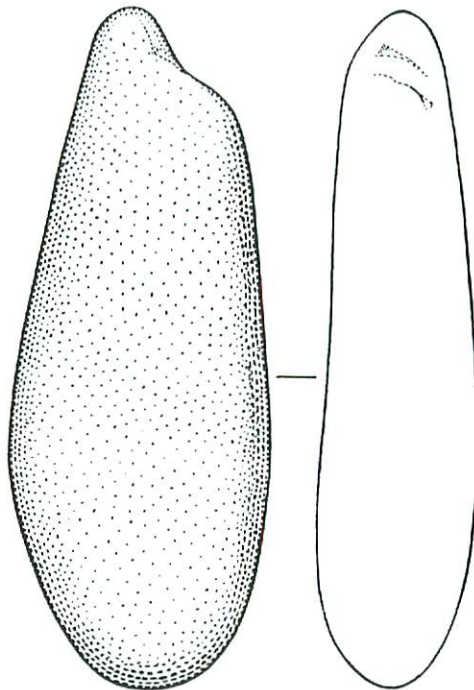
Figure 3. *Symonds Yat East Rockshelter. Lithostratigraphic section in Area 1. Key: 1) dark grey-black soil; 2) tufaceous stalagmite; 3) reddish-brown gritty clay; 4) reddish-brown silty clay.*

Two areas of the rockshelter were examined (Figure 2). The stratigraphic section shown in Figure 3 reveals the sequence of deposits preserved in Test Area 1. Latest prehistoric pottery, animal bones and modern artefacts were found in the superficial layer of black soil. Lateglacial flint artefacts and fauna were recovered from the sealed layer of brown to reddish-brown gritty clay. The artefacts included two backed blades and a burin with its refitting spall, the two latter pieces being found in Test Area 2 (Figure 4). The finds are of typical Final Palaeolithic type and probably date to the second half of the Lateglacial Interstadial (c. 12-11,000 BP) although this will need to be confirmed by radiocarbon dating. Very large numbers of tiny flint chips, including some which could be refitted, were recovered



55

0 5 cm



6

Figure 4. Symonds Yat East Rockshelter, Final Palaeolithic artefacts. 55) Burin on lateral truncation with refitting burin spall; 6) Retouchoir (?).

in Test Area 2 in undisturbed sediments next to the relocated Rogers' trench. Organic materials in the Lateglacial level are exceptionally well-preserved as exemplified by the occurrence of fish and bird bones in the cave sediments. The artefacts and faunal remains will provide a singular opportunity for studying aspects of site palaeoeconomy and environmental conditions at the end of the last glaciation.

Area 1

Madawg Shelter: a very large west-facing limestone rockshelter (NGR SO 54651526) overlooking the Wye. Continued investigation beneath the overhang (Figure 5) uncovered an upper sequence of deposits containing artefactual evidence of Later Mesolithic and Early Bronze Age date. The Mesolithic finds are concentrated in the central and northern zones of the shelter and show distinct patterns of activity around an ash spread. Associated with the ashy deposits are microliths of Later Mesolithic type (Figure 6) and hazelnut shells. The finds also include a remarkable collection of eleven European Cowrie (*Trivia monacha*) shell beads, imported from a marine shore intertidal zone and deliberately perforated for ornamental purposes (Figure 7). The shells were found in a tight cluster suggesting they had originally been strung together as part of a necklace or chain. The nearest natural source of the cowries is in the Bristol Channel, although this species is very widely distributed along the northern and western shorelines of Britain (Seaward, 1982). Analogous examples of perforated cowrie beads have been found in Later Mesolithic contexts in caves in South Devon (Rosenfeld, 1964; A Roberts, *pers comm.*).

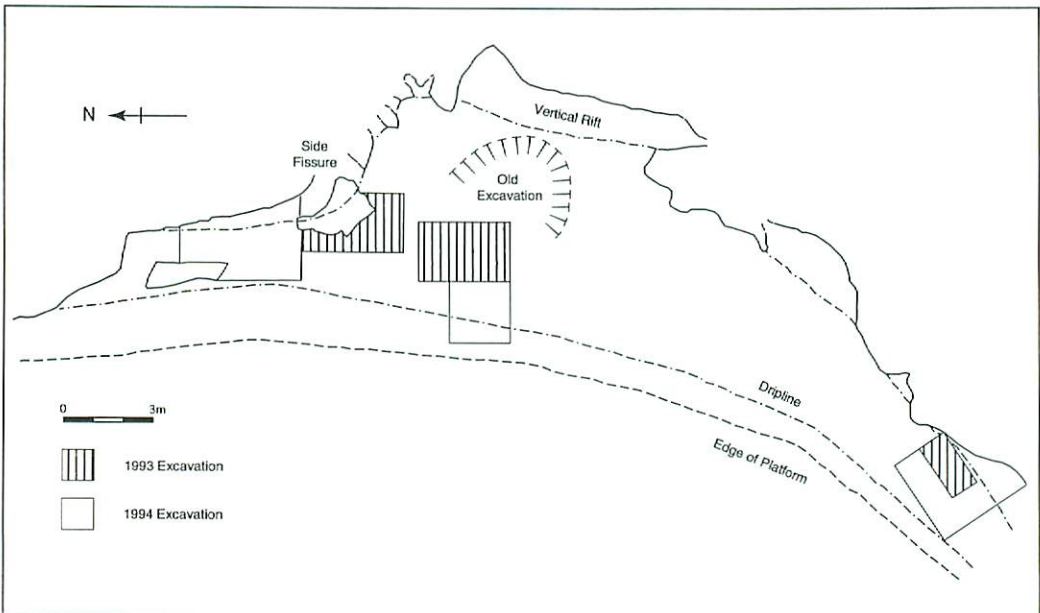


Figure 5. Madawg Rockshelter. Excavated areas 1993-4.

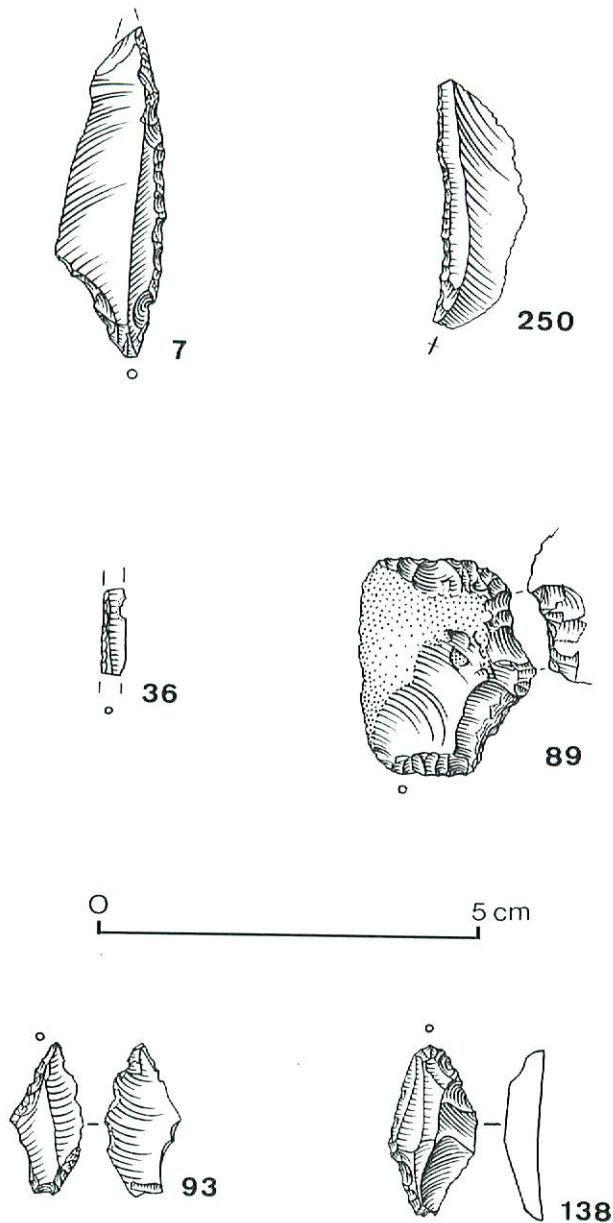


Figure 6. Symonds Yat East Rockshelter, Final Palaeolithic artefacts. 7) Penknife point; 250) Backed bladelet. Madawg Rockshelter, Later Mesolithic microliths. 36) Straight-backed microlith; 89) End-scraper with ventral scalar damage; 93) Oblique point with inverse distal truncation; 138) Unclassified microlith.

The Early Bronze Age deposits are thickest at the southern end of the shelter where a deep niche in the rock, only partially examined this year, was found to contain large fragments of Food Vessel pots and some human remains. If the latter is part of a burial, as we suspect, then it contrasts markedly with other burials under round barrows on top of Little Doward, less than a kilometre to the west. This may point to an interesting local diversity of contemporary funerary traditions in the Bronze Age. The artefacts and fauna from Madawg rockshelter are exceptionally well-preserved in the Mesolithic and Bronze Age levels and provide important contextual information for interpreting environmental conditions and human activities in these periods.

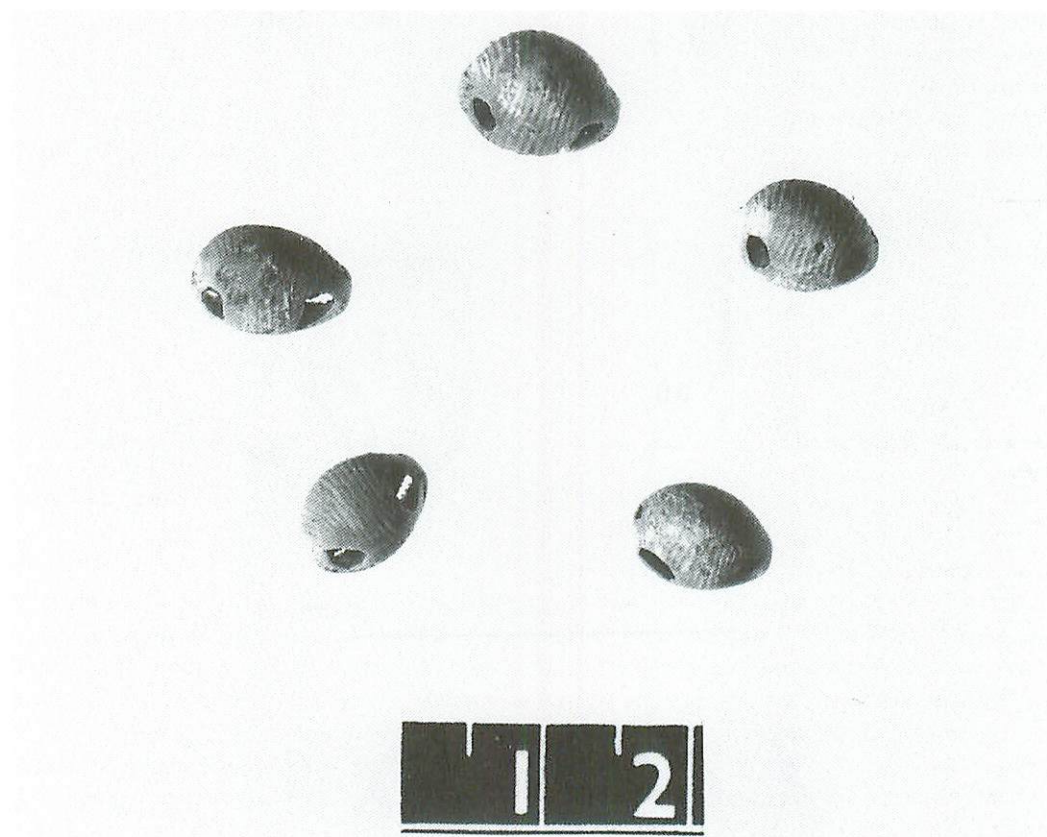


Figure 7. *Madawg Rockshelter. Perforated European Cowrie (Trivia monacha) beads. scale in cm.*

Area 3

A small fissure cave (NGR SO 53901600), possibly King Arthur's Hall Cave, was examined this year. It lies on the southeastern corner of Little Doward Iron Age Hillfort, just beneath its ramparts. The hillfort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Hereford and

Worcestershire SAM 26), and by dint of its location, the cave is included within the protected area. Almost nothing is known of the early history of the cave except from a brief reference in Edmunds (1880) which reports the chance discovery in the 18th century of a human skeleton. Apart from a large (metal?) spear tip, no other artefacts were described with the burial and the bones and spear were subsequently lost. See ApSimon, 1994 (this volume) for a fuller account of the bibliography of this site.

An EDM survey was made of the cave and its entrance area (Figure 8) and a test pit (1.5 x 1 m) was hand-trowelled to a

depth of 70-80 cm to a point where the rift narrowed into a choke or rock floor. The deposits comprised a 10 cm thick dark-humic layer overlying a homogeneous deposit of brown clay which became progressively stonier towards the base. The brown clay contained a fairly rich assemblage of well-preserved large and micro-mammalian bones of Holocene age. No trace of the human burial was found, and the only artefact recovered was a heavily battered, elongate hammerstone, which due to the extremely fresh condition of the worn end might be very recent in age. The cave does not appear to contain any Pleistocene deposits, but the rich microfaunal collection is potentially significant for environmental reconstruction and for correlating with other deposits in nearby caves.

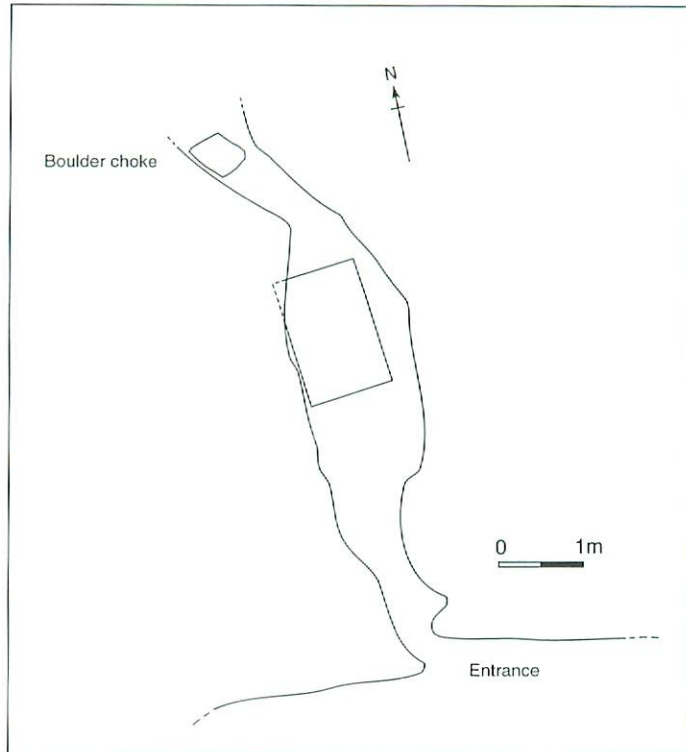


Figure 8. *King Arthur's Hall Cave. Plan of the cave and its excavated area.*

FUTURE WORK

Now that the high archaeological potential of the area has been firmly established, it is intended to continue the investigation of the recently documented sites (e.g. Symonds Yat East, Madawg) with a view to obtaining further samples for dating and for site function analyses. At the same time, it is hoped to extend the survey to include new locations closer to

present river level (e.g. in Area 6). The whole project is envisaged as a five-year programme of survey and site investigation.

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