

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTE:

KING ARTHUR'S CAVE, KING ARTHUR'S HALL, AND THE GIANT'S SKELETON.

by

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It is not known when the name of King Arthur first became attached to any of the sites in the Wye valley. However, in some nineteenth century literature (Nicholls 1866; Edmunds 1874; cf. Jones 1990, 1991) King Arthur's Cave is equated with 'King Arthur's Hall' and with the discovery, reputedly around 1700, of a skeleton of giant stature accompanied by a brass-headed spear. This is supported by the map of Herefordshire dated 1805, in Gough (1806, v.3, p64), which marks King Arthur's Hall between Little and Great Doward, roughly where King Arthur's Cave is. However it is contradicted by Symonds (1871, p433) who refers to two separate sites: "On the summit of the Great Doward Hill are the vestiges of an ancient encampment known as 'King Arthur's Hall,' and on its western slope is a cavern called King Arthur's Cave".

The earliest reference appears to be in the additions made to Camden's *Britannia* in the late 18th century (Gibson 1772; Gough 1789, v.2, p448; 1806, v.3, p72): "in Whitchurch parish is a hill with entrenchments called Great Doward and King Arthur's Hall and on an opposite hill called Little Doward a square camp. In digging hereabouts for limestone and iron ore broad arrowheads have been found and in a place which seemed to be arched over an almost entire human skeleton ...". This description presumably explains the suggestion of: "possibly remains of a megalithic structure", at King Arthur's Cave (Clinch 1908, p166).

However the primary source quoted in Heath (1799), says that the site of the skeleton find was on the north-east edge of the camp on Little Doward, on the side overlooking Monmouth, while the Rev. T.W. Webb (1884) in a diary entry made in 1851, records a story of: "a whole skeleton found in fissure, Roman joint [giant?] in rocks round east end of hill below Mr Blakemore's limekiln".

The OS 1:10 000 map SO 51 NW, marks a disused limekiln at 5425 1552, which suggests that the find, if there really was one, may have been in or close to the rock shelter at the 'Seven Sisters' (SO 5472 1522) in which human bones were found in 1925 (Hewer 1925, p155). At the back of this shelter a number of boulders were found cemented to the rock wall by flowstone, which might have given rise to the descriptions of the site of the skeleton find as 'arched over' or a 'megalithic structure'. Alternatively the find could have been in one of the vertical fissure caves opening in the higher cliffs, including those mapped at SO 5414 1574 and 5420 1565. This alternative is probably to be preferred because the account is 50 years nearer in time to the supposed discovery than Webb's diary entry. The author has seen no 'entrenchments' on Great Doward, but some of the old quarry workings on its summit may represent their former site or have been mistaken for them. A small enclosure of Romano-British date has been excavated in Lord's Wood, to the south of Great Doward (Hart 1967).

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