

THIRD INTERIM REPORT ON THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE WYE VALLEY, 1995

by

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ABSTRACT

Continuing survey and excavation work was undertaken in 1995 by the Wye Valley Caves Project. Efforts were focused on King Arthur's Cave (entrance), Madawg Rockshelter and two new caves in Coldwell Rocks. The results show that a well-preserved Lateglacial sequence with artefacts still survives at King Arthur's Cave. The Late Mesolithic levels at Madawg were further sampled for carbonised plant remains and cowrie shells. Iron Age evidence was obtained from one of the Coldwell sites.

INTRODUCTION & AIMS

1995 was the third year of a five year programme of fieldwork in the caves and rockshelter sites in the Wye Valley near Monmouth. The Project is organised and directed by the author. The work involves the study of the human uses of caves both in terms of the use of individual sites and in relation to other sites in the local landscape. One of the longer term aims of the project is to identify why certain caves were used in preference to others and how the function of these sites changed through time. A fuller statement of the overall research aims is presented in Barton 1993.

The survey area is a deep limestone gorge, about 4 km long, just north of Monmouth. Two preliminary seasons of reconnaissance and survey (Barton 1993, 1994) have identified an estimated 30-40 caves and rockshelters with high potential for archaeological remains. Apart from the well-known sites of King Arthur's Cave and Merlin's Cave, most of the other sites are unexplored. Initial work at some of the new sites has demonstrated the survival of a rich variety of archaeological deposits spanning the Upper Palaeolithic to the Middle Ages.

During the 1995 season, we worked at in three different locations in the gorge: King Arthur's Cave, Madawg Shelter and Coldwell Rocks. The objectives were threefold:

- 1) To produce a detailed ground plan of sites in each area, with the likely extent of *in situ* deposits.
- 2) To collect archaeological evidence relating to the human uses of caves (at all periods)
- 3) To obtain palaeoenvironmental and chronostratigraphic evidence for dating human activities in the caves.

RESULTS OF THE 1995 SEASON

King Arthur's Cave (Figure 1, location 2)

This cave was virtually emptied of deposits in the 19th century, but as very little information existed on the nature of deposits in the cave mouth and outer entrance, it was felt worthwhile to examine the Victorian spoil tip in the hope that additional undisturbed sediments might survive underneath it. Scheduled Monument Consent was therefore obtained to undertake a full survey of the entrance area. It is now possible to confirm the survival of undisturbed and archaeologically-rich sediments in Trenches A-C and D (Figure 2). Further work will be necessary to complete the mapping of deposits and provide stratigraphic correlation between sediments in the exposed trenches. We would estimate that the area of *in situ* deposits probably extends under much of the present tip. This work has shown that the reconstructed section given in ApSimon, *et al* (1992, Figure 5, p. 194.) is in need of amendment.

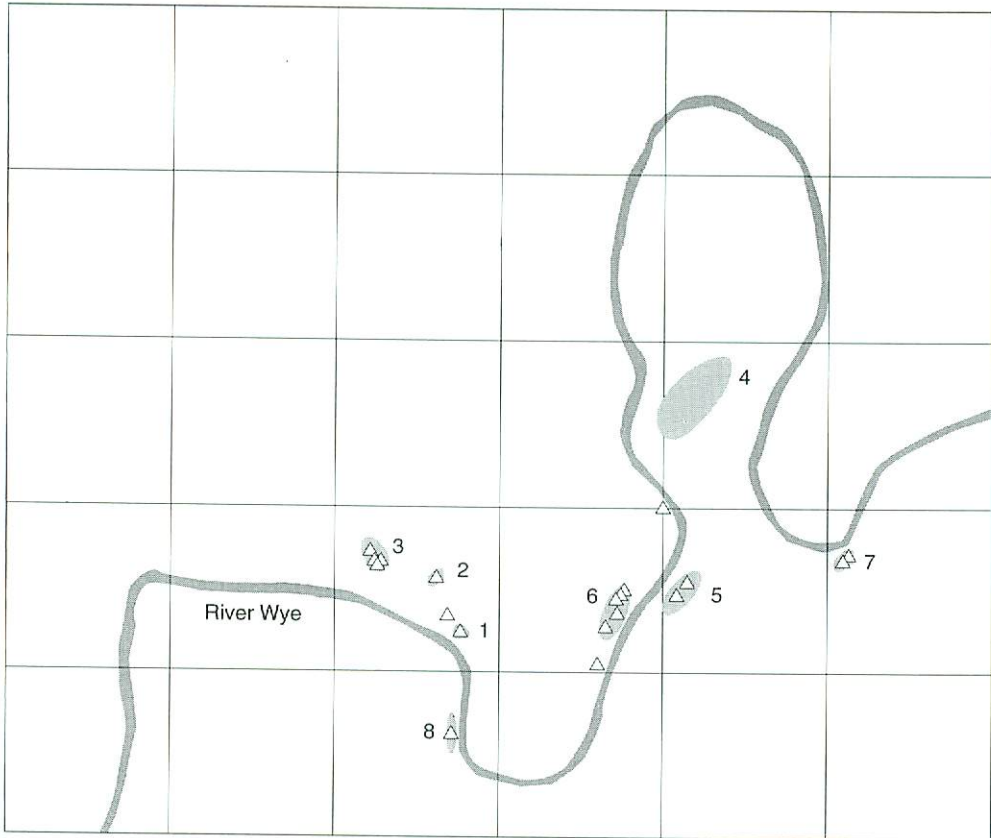


Figure 1. Distribution of current survey areas and documented cave sites. Key: 1) Madawg Rockshelter; 2) King Arthur's Cave; 3) Little Doward Caves; 4) Huntsham Hill Rockshelters; 5) Symonds Yat East; 6) Merlin's Cave and Symonds Yat West Caves; 7) Coldwell Rocks Caves; 8) Lady Park Wood Caves. Grid squares 1 km²

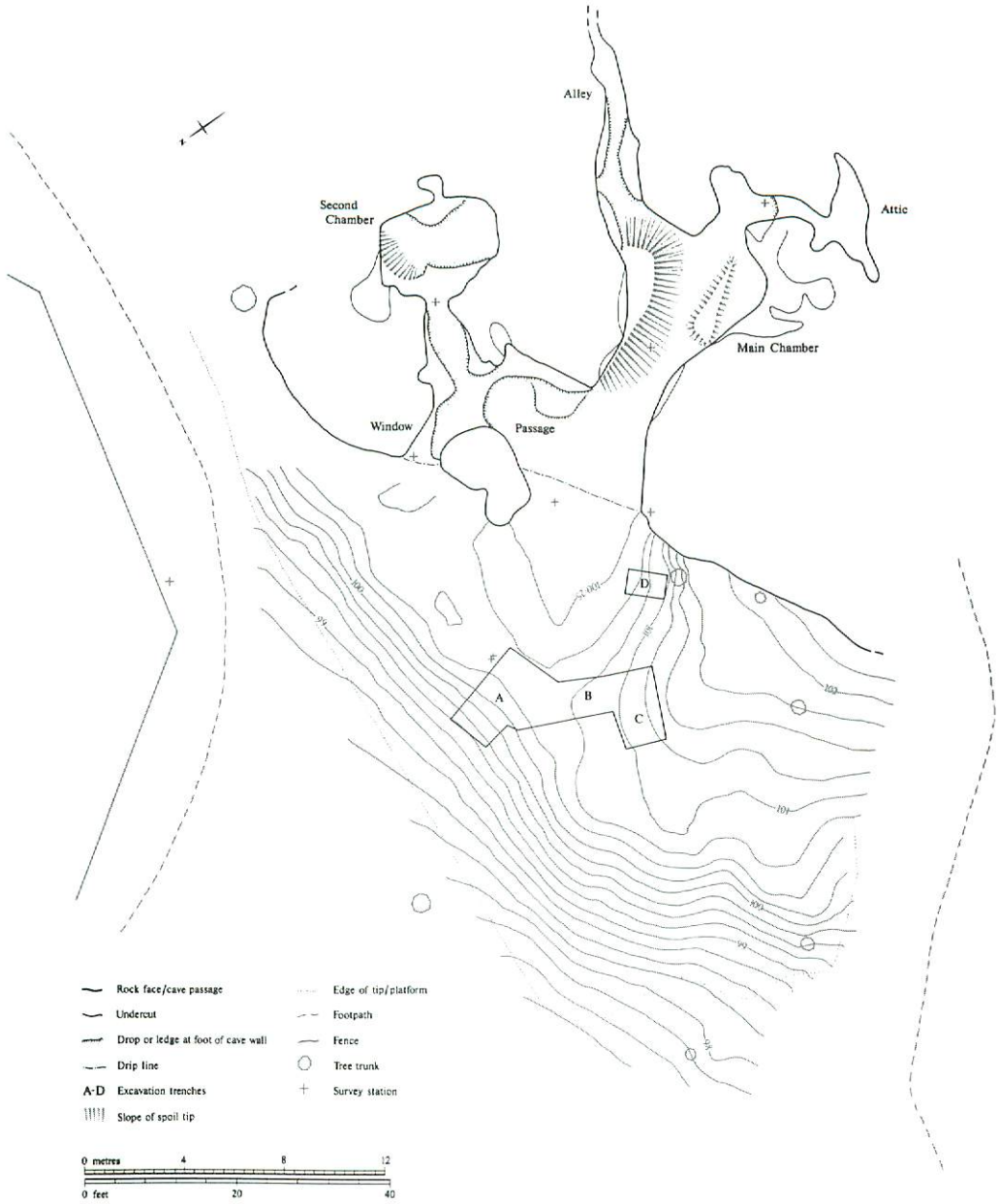


Figure 2. Site plan of King Arthur's Cave.

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Unstratified flint artefacts and faunal remains were recorded in large numbers from the Victorian spoil tip. The animal bones included well-preserved Pleistocene specimens of spotted hyaena (*Crocota crocuta*), woolly rhinoceros (*Coelodonta antiquitatis*), woolly mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*), bison (*Bison priscus*), reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) and horse (*Equus ferus*); as well as fauna of Holocene age. Amongst the artefacts were backed tools and debitage of Lateglacial type (Figure 3). The finds included a number of Romano-British and Medieval pottery sherds. Human skeletal evidence of presumed Later Prehistoric age was also found.

Two areas of *in situ* deposits (Trenches A-C and D) were investigated in detail. In both cases well-stratified sediments were observed, which in Trench D included a sequence sealed by up to one metre of coarse limestone scree. Microfauna recovered from this unit was shown to include cold climate species indicators e.g. collared lemming (*Dicrostonyx torquatus*) (Cath Price *pers. comm.*), last present in Britain during the Lateglacial Loch Lomond Stadial. The stony cave earth sediments immediately beneath the scree provided evidence of Lateglacial flint debitage and a backed blade (Figure 3, 145). Further dense scatters of artefacts, including stratified pottery, bone and flints were recovered in Trench A-C. Both areas were extensively sampled for dating (Optically Stimulated Luminescence, Thermoluminescence, radiocarbon), sedimentological and environmental analyses (molluscs, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds and charcoal). All artefacts were three-dimensionally recorded and all sediments systematically sieved.

The results of work in the small areas so far sampled are extremely encouraging. The nature, density and excellent preservation of materials indicates that further investigation is warranted.

A measured plan of the cave and its exterior deposits was made with the help of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and is given here as Figure 2.

Madawg Rockshelter (Figure 1, location 1)

Excavations were completed at this shallow, 30 m long rockshelter in 1995. Work in the final season concentrated near the middle of the shelter in an area which had previously produced Late Mesolithic remains in association with ashy hearth deposits. Further flint artefacts and animal bones were recorded from this context. In addition, a number of bulk samples were removed from the site for wet sieving. These are currently being analysed for very fragile remains of carbonised plants, nuts and fruit seeds, some of it presumably food leftovers. Last year specimens of hazel (*Corylus avellana*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and hawthorn (*Crataegus*) were recovered and direct radiocarbon accelerator dates are awaited on individual samples.

One of the most distinctive and unusual aspects of the Late Mesolithic assemblage is the collection of well-preserved beads made from shells of the European cowrie (*Trivia monacha*) recovered at the site. The fact that these have been modified into ornaments is shown by small double holes bored into each shell. As the cowries are of marine origin it is likely that they were humanly imported to the site from a contemporary Mesolithic coastline. Collaborative work on recently discovered Late Mesolithic sites such as those near Newport, Gwent (Bell 1994) will allow closer comparison of activities at "inland" and "coastal" locations of this period.

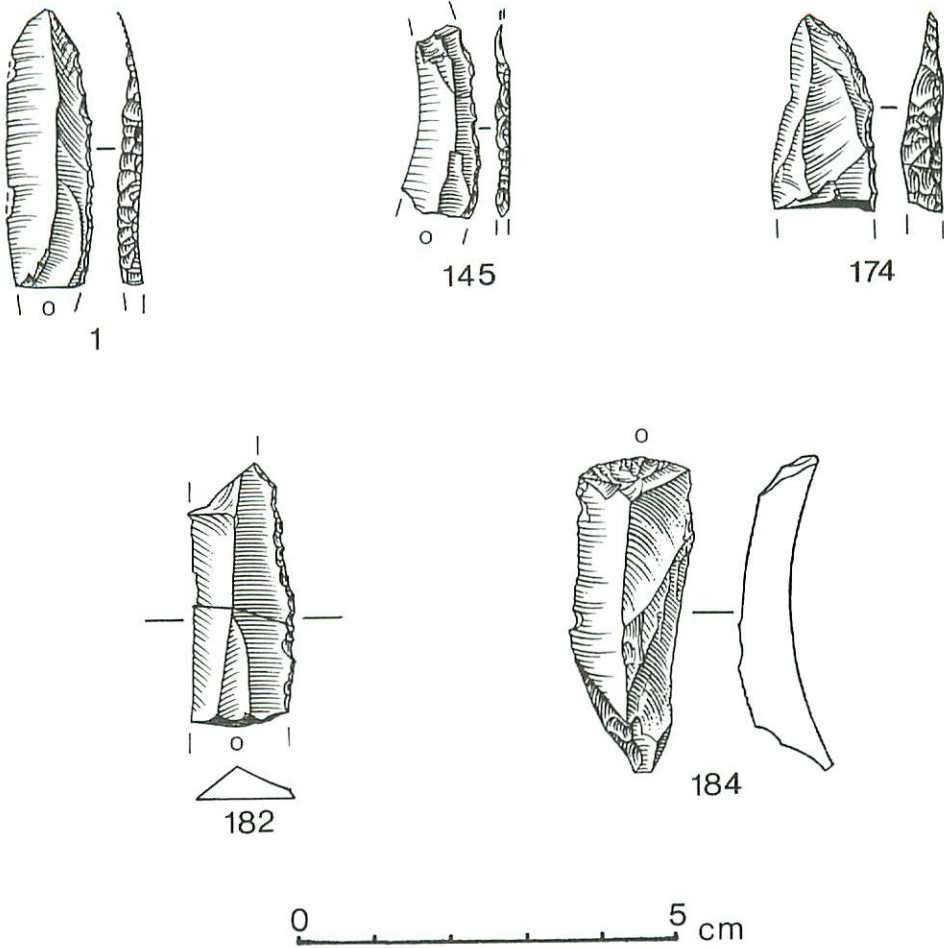


Figure 3. Flint artefacts recovered from King Arthur's Cave. Backed blades: 1, 145, 182; Backed point: 174; End-scraper: 184. Unstratified: 174, 182, 184; stratified, trench D: 145; trench A: 1.

Coldwell Rocks (Figure 1, location 7)

A new further site, containing several caves is located beyond the eastern end of the main gorge. Two caves, designated Coldwell Caves 1 and 4, were investigated. Both are located about 50 m above the valley floor (that is at approx. 100 m AOD). They have west facing entrances and relatively small exterior platforms. A small test trench was opened in the entrance of Coldwell Cave 1. Although this revealed evidence of previous (unrecorded) excavation, sufficient undisturbed deposits remained to confirm the presence of Iron Age activity. Large sherds of pottery together with cut-marked animal bone suggests a relatively small domestic site. No earlier archaeological levels were recorded. The adjacent site of Coldwell Cave 4 proved to have a long environmental sequence with a thick tufa deposit overlying cave earth sediments. Both large and small mammal remains were recovered but the site was archaeologically sterile.

Coldwell cave 2 is a rockshelter and 3 is a collapsed cave. The size and positions of all these sites is currently being surveyed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and this work will be incorporated into the final report of this project.

Coldwell Cave 1 provides the first unequivocal evidence of the Iron Age use of caves in this area of the Wye Valley. Radiocarbon dating of the cut-marked bone and analysis of the charcoals will give new contextual and environmental information on this small-scale occupation site. This in turn will add further useful evidence to our understanding of the patterns of human activities in the Wye Valley caves.

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