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FOURTH INTERIM REPORT ON THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE WYE VALLEY, 1996

by

R.N.E. BARTON

ABSTRACT

This paper details the continuing investigation of caves and rockshelters in the Upper Wye Valley. Excavations near the entrance of King Arthur's Cave have revealed a well-preserved sequence of Lateglacial-Postglacial deposits containing Late Upper Palaeolithic artefacts and fauna. Finds of Bronze Age pottery and Later Mesolithic artefacts are reported from the North Alcove of the Second Chamber, inside the cave. A new survey of Merlin's Cave has found intact sediments on the cave walls enabling the collection of samples of microfaunal remains and human bone for dating purposes. The results of work at four other sites, one of which has produced evidence of prehistoric flintwork and fauna are also summarised .

INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

The fourth annual excavation and survey in the Wye Valley Caves took place from July 15 to August 3 1996. As in previous seasons the work was organised and directed by Dr Nick Barton, Senior Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University. The project is financed by Oxford Brookes University and the British Museum who will be the main recipient of the excavation finds.

The project is part of a wider programme of research into the variation in patterns of human landscape use and palaeoenvironmental changes in the Lateglacial and Postglacial periods. It involves the spatial analysis of human activities in caves at an individual site level and in relation to contemporary use of other cave sites in the local landscape. The limestone valley of the upper Wye contains a large number of available caves and rockshelters (about 40). One of the aims is to identify why certain caves in this area were used in preference to others and how the function of these sites varied through time. This is a unique study in Britain. The range of archaeological deposits represented in the caves includes the Late Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British, Roman and Medieval periods (Barton, 1993, 1994, 1995).

This year's work concentrated on two major sites: King Arthur's Cave (Figure 1, no. 2) and Merlin's Cave (Figure 1, no. 8), both scheduled ancient monuments and known for the exceptional quality of their archaeological and palaeontological collections. Survey also continued at four previously untested caves and rockshelters (Figure 1, nos. 9-12).

RESULTS OF THE 1996 SEASON

King Arthur's Cave

Continuing excavations on the west side of the main entrance (Figure 2) uncovered a 2 m deep sequence of sediments comprising a dark stony clay (Unit 2) overlying a unit of coarse whitish-yellow limestone scree (Unit 3) and a fine grey, earthy limestone gravel (Unit 4) (Figure 3). Fragments of Bronze Age pottery (Lynne Bevan, *pers comm*) and faunal remains were recovered in Unit 2. According to observations by Dr Chris Proctor (Exeter University) and Dr Simon Collcutt, (Oxford Archaeological Associates) the scree unit (Unit 3) resulted from rapid disaggregation of the local bedrock and high sedimentation rates. It is probable that these sediments very quickly covered the underlying Unit 4. The dark humic component present in Unit 4 may indicate burial of a vegetated palaeo-landsurface. Unit 3 contains reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), arctic hare (*Lepus timidus*), collared lemming (*Dicrostonyx torquatus*),

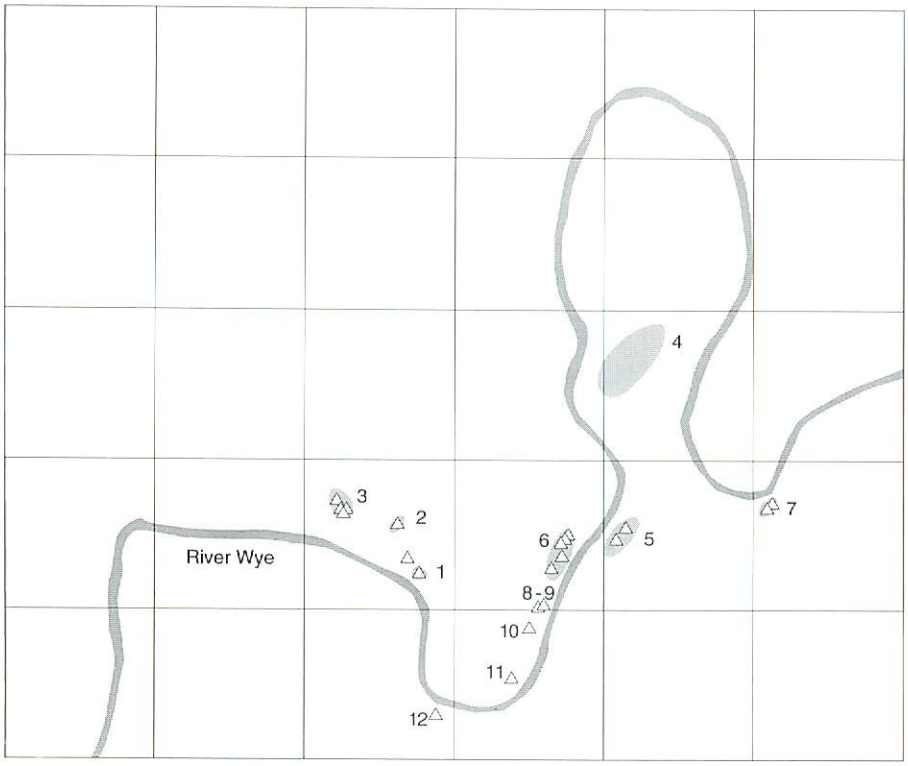


Figure 1. *Distribution of current survey areas and documented sites. Key: 1) Madawg Rockshelter; 2) King Arthur's Cave; 3) Little Doward Caves; 4) Huntsham Hill Rockshelters; 5) Symonds Yat East Caves; 6) Symonds Yat West Caves; 7) Coldwell Rocks Caves; 8) Merlin's Cave; 9) MB-1 Rockshelter; 10) MB-2 Cave; 11) MB-3 Cave; 12) Lady Park Wood Cave-1. Grid squares 1 km^2.*

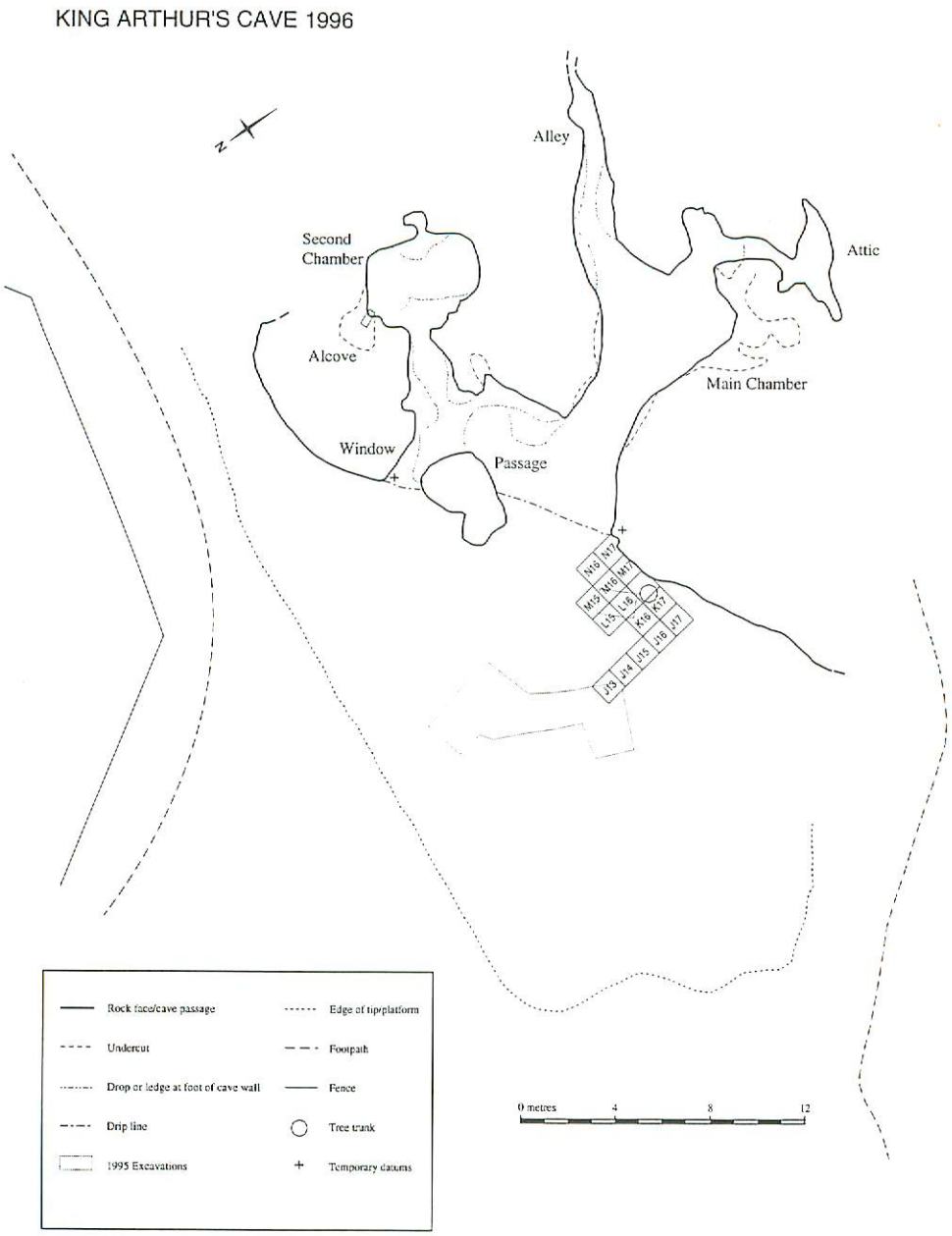


Figure 2. *Site plan of King Arthur's Cave showing 1996 excavation areas.*

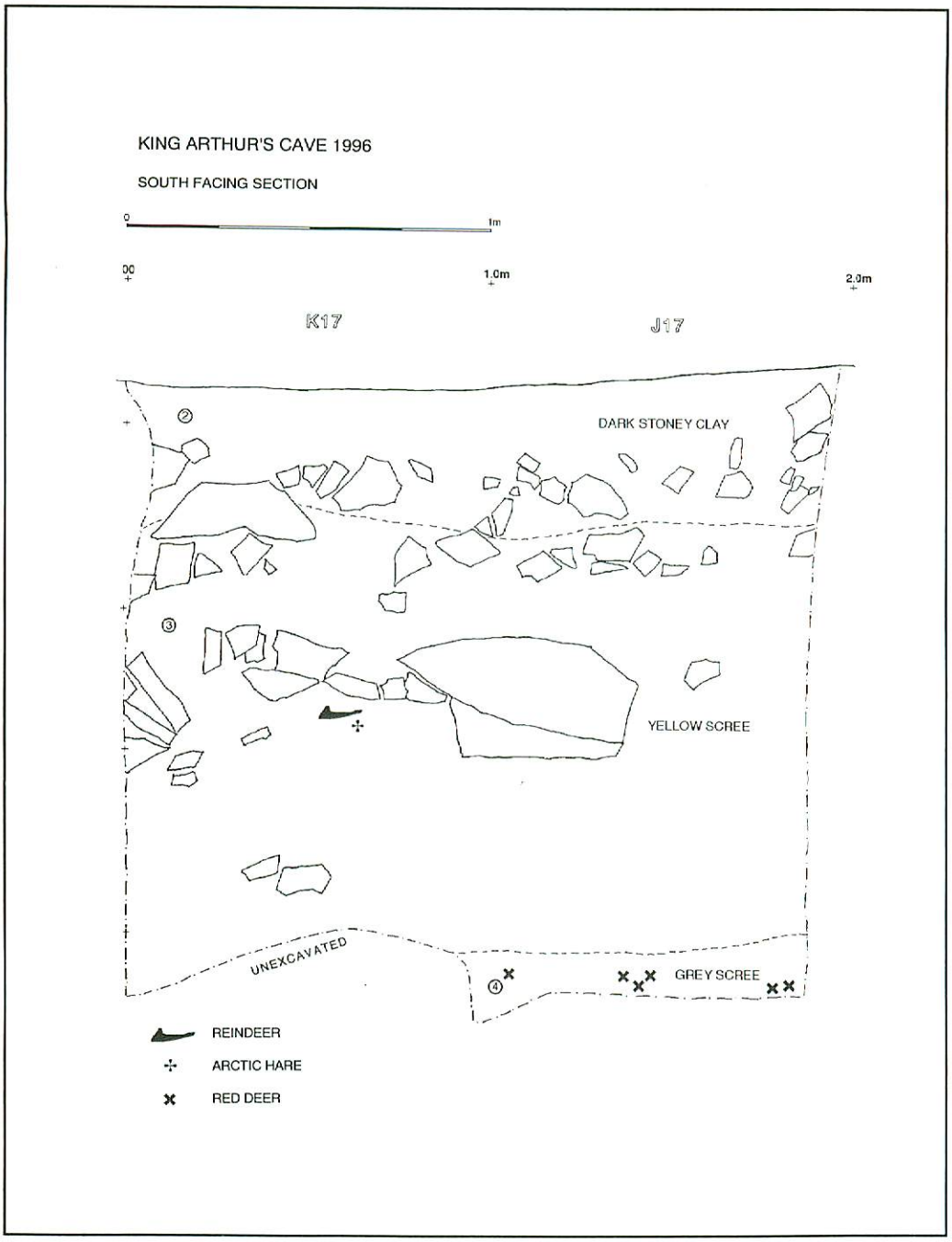


Figure 3. *Schematic section of deposits on the west side of the main entrance of King Arthur's Cave.*

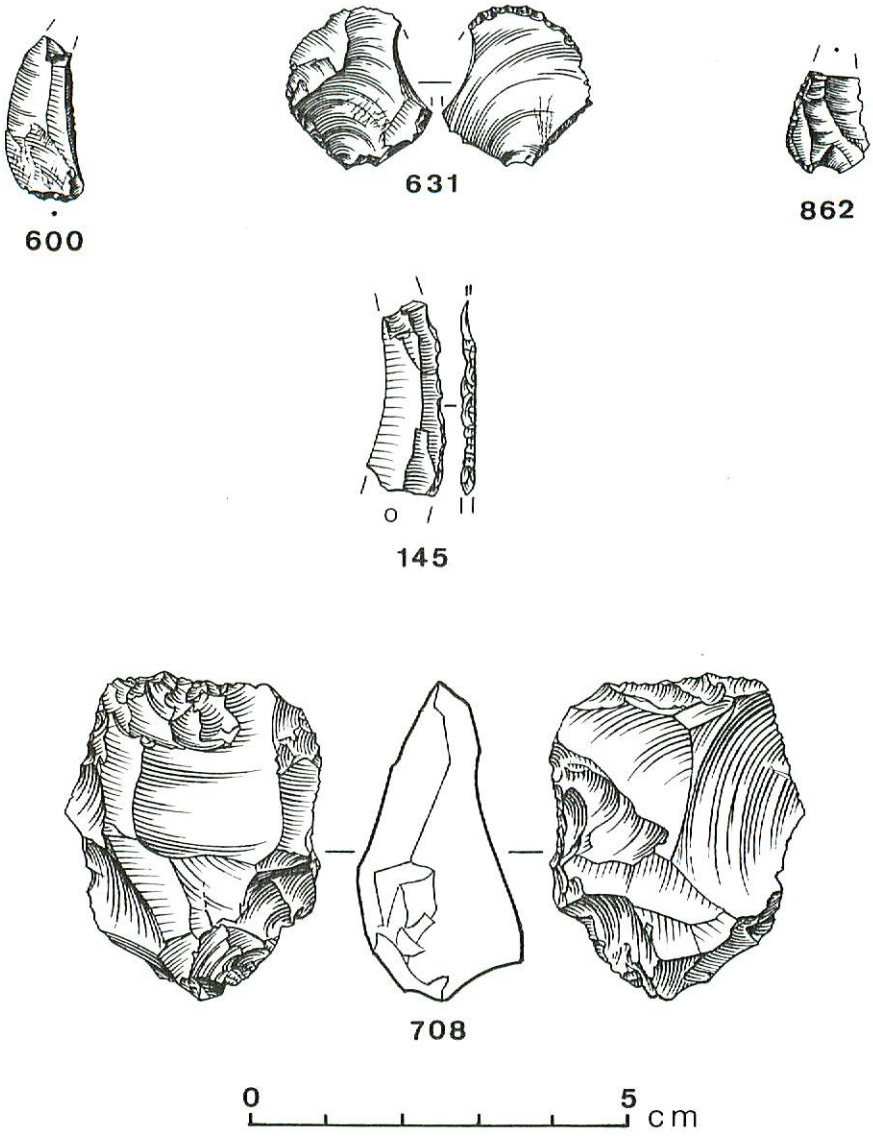


Figure 4. *Flint artefacts recovered from King Arthur's Cave. Multiplatform core: 708 (N16, Unit 4); Backed blade: 145 (L16, base of Unit 3); Truncated blade: 600 (N16 base of Unit 3); Retouched flake: 631 (N15 base of Unit 3); Oblique microlith point: 862 (Alcove test pit, Second Chamber).*

Figure 5. *Perforated marine shells, two cowrie (*Trivia monacha*) and one periwinkle (*Littorina *sp.), recovered in King Arthur's Cave, Second Chamber, Alcove. Scale 25 mm.*

Norway lemming (*Lemmus lemmus*) and narrow-skulled vole (*Microtus gregalis*). None of these species is now a native of the British Isles and collectively they might all be expected to occur in the Younger Dryas (Loch Lomond Stadial, 10-11,000 radiocarbon years ago).

Of species so far identified in Unit 4 red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) may date to the warmer conditions of the Lateglacial Interstadial (12-13,000 radiocarbon years ago). Some of the red deer bone is smashed and is associated with Final Upper Palaeolithic artefacts which occur in the same layer and at the very base of Unit 3 (Figure 4). Radiocarbon accelerator dating of the faunas in Units 3 and 4 is currently in progress.

Inside the cave exploration was begun in the Second Chamber (Figure 2). Removal of superficial rubbish on the floor of the chamber revealed an underlying infill of mostly loose earth and rocky debris. The disturbed sediments were cleared to rock floor and, apart from a few modern artefacts, including a Victorian glass toy marble, they were archaeologically sterile. A small alcove at the northern end of the chamber was also investigated by means of an exploratory trench measuring 70 by 50 by 50 cm. Although the deposits in the alcove were obviously disturbed, unlike those in the rest of the Second Chamber they were much more compact and yielded an exceptionally rich quantity of finds including lithic artefacts, faunal remains in various conditions of preservation, Bronze Age pot sherds and three Mesolithic perforated marine shell beads (Figure 5). From the vertical relationship of these finds it seems likely that the stratigraphy in this part of the cave had been locally "inverted" probably as a result of animal

burrowing or illicit excavation. Further exploratory work will be necessary in order to confirm these observations.

As a result of the new work in the Second Chamber it now seems that this may not be the location of the deep excavation trench recorded by Symonds in 1871 (ApSimon *et al.* 1992). However, it is still not certain when and by whom the Chamber was opened and subsequently backfilled. In the absence of any written or photographic evidence it can only be surmised that this was the product of mining operations, perhaps in the nineteenth century. One of the most significant findings of the 1996 excavation is that considerable quantities of archaeological deposit still survive in the alcove of this chamber. The fact that the three tiny perforated marine shells, two cowrie (*Trivia monacha*) and one periwinkle (*Littorina* sp.), were recovered within such close proximity of one another, strongly implies that they derive from a sealed archaeological context further within the alcove. The discovery of these artefacts also provides the first tangible links between the human activities at this cave and Madawg Rockshelter (Barton, 1994, p 70).

Merlin's Cave

Merlin's Cave (Figure 6) is known for a rich archaeological assemblage of later prehistoric metalwork, bone artefacts, pottery, flints and human remains (Hewer, 1924, Parry, 1994). It may also have contained evidence of Later Mesolithic activities, to judge from references made in the excavation report to a marine shell bead and a perforated fox tooth (Hewer, 1926, pp 217-220). Unfortunately, many of the finds from the pre-war excavations were either lost or destroyed in the last wartime bombing of Bristol. A few objects remain in the UBSS Museum (Donovan, 1951) and were listed in Anon (1971). Material from an excavation in 1912 can be found in Bristol City Museum (ApSimon *et al.* 1992, p 247).

Merlin's Cave is also regarded as important for its palaeontological collections: it had a large and diverse late Quaternary fauna, comparable with some of the richest small vertebrate assemblages in Britain. Nearly 600 microfaunal bones were recorded in the earlier investigations (Bate, 1901, Hewer, 1925, 1926) referable to over 30 different species. Only part of this collection survives today, in the Natural History Museum, London; the material is unstratified with only a general provenance to the cave.

In 1996, remnants of deposit on the walls of the cave were investigated in detail and those on the west wall near the entrance were sampled for small vertebrates and other finds (Figures 6 and 7). The sediment on the west wall contains abundant microfaunal remains in places forming up to 50% of the matrix (Chris Proctor, *pers comm*). The deposit is quite well cemented and there appear to be traces of two stalagmite floors. Associated with the upper floor are human postcranial bones cemented onto the wall and there is also a negative impression of a human cranium visible in the stalagmite (Figure 7). Amongst the faunal material identified and collected lower down in the sequence were steppe pika (*Ochotona pusilla*), Norway lemming (*Lemmus lemmus*), water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*), arctic hare (*Lepus timidus*) and northern vole (*Microtus oeconomus*). An accelerator radiocarbon date already exists on unstratified steppe pika bones from the cave. It was obtained from a combined sample of pika mandibles labelled 'Great Doward Cave', with an age of 10,020 +/- 120 BP (sample OxA-516). Direct radiocarbon dating of small vertebrates from the new sample will be necessary in order to test the stratigraphic integrity of the cave wall deposits and to examine potential correlations with

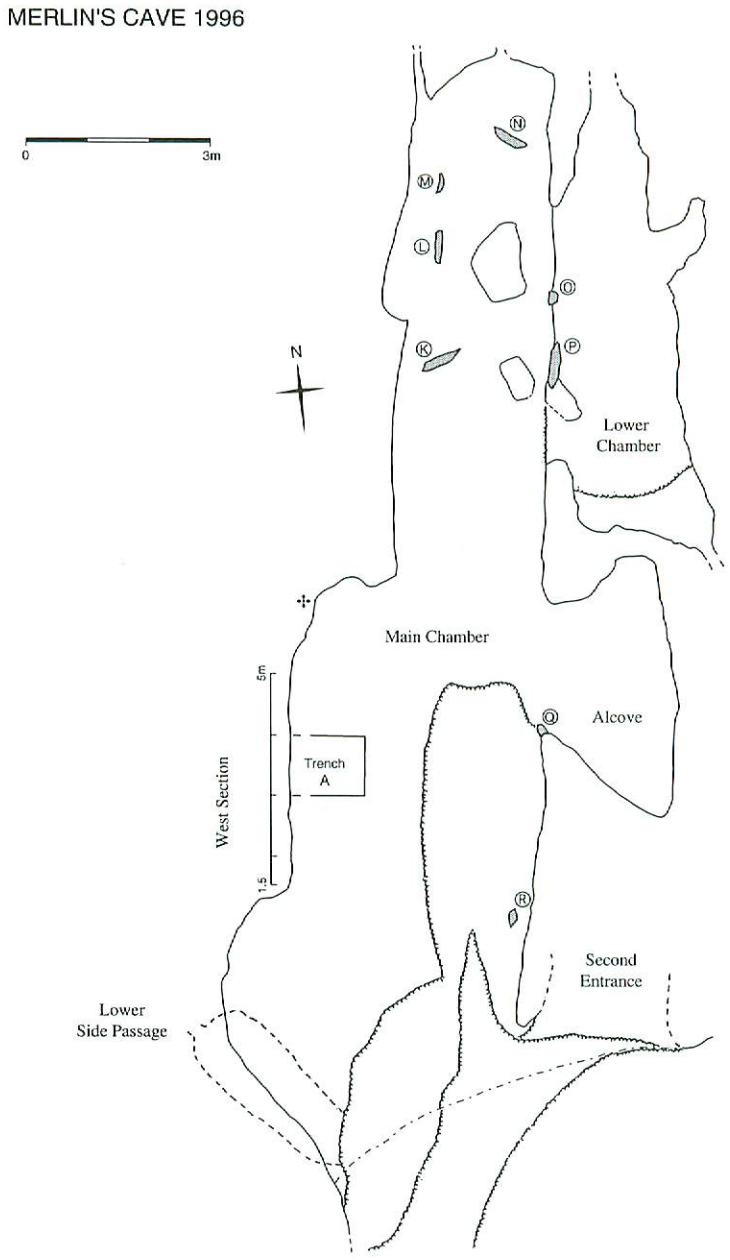
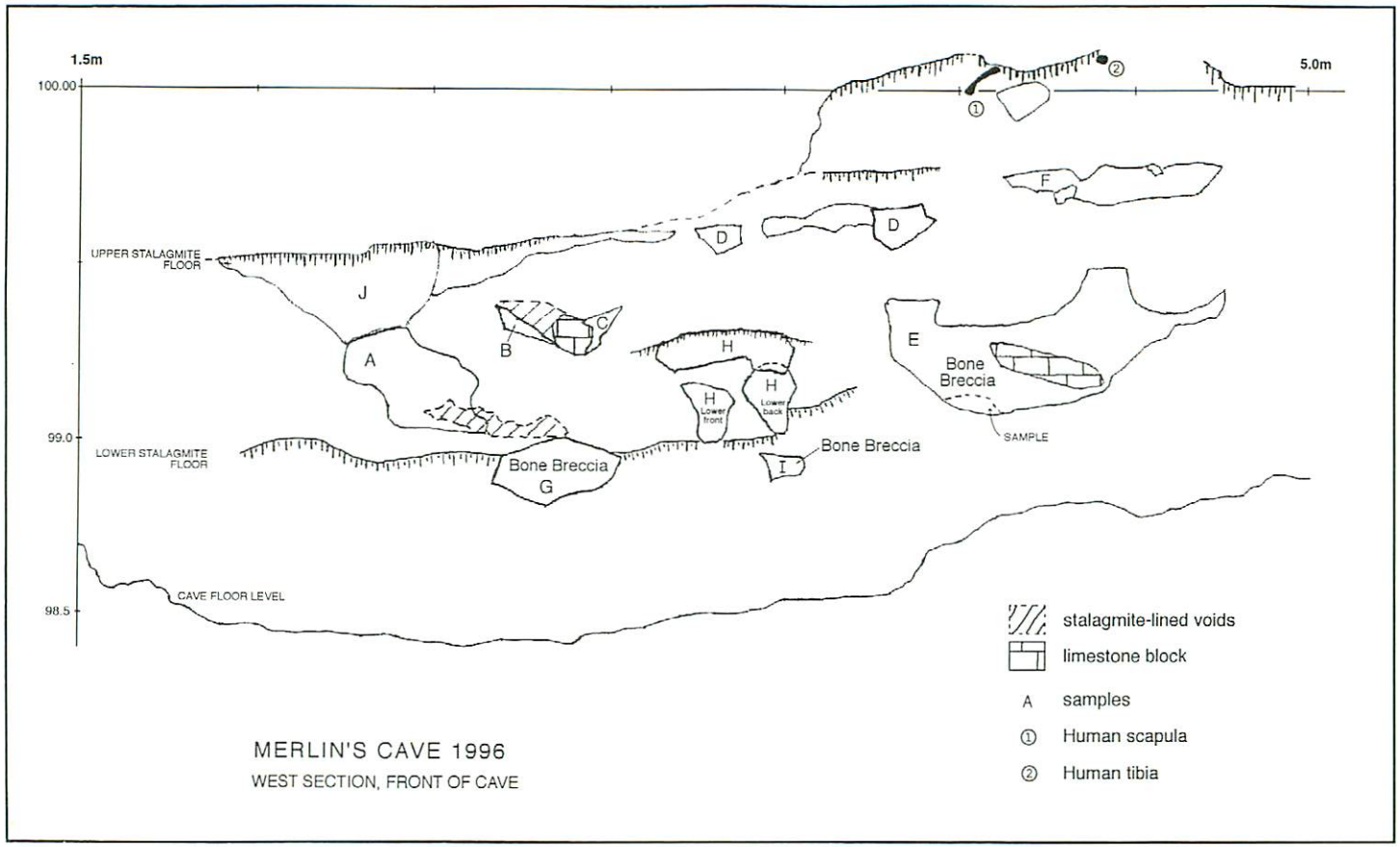


Figure 6. *Site plan of Merlin's Cave showing 1996 sample points. The small cross marks the position of the negative human cranial impression in the stalagmite floor.*



MERLIN'S CAVE 1996

WEST SECTION, FRONT OF CAVE

other dated microfaunas from nearby caves. A longer term aim is to investigate ecological changes in the Wye Valley during the Lateglacial-Postglacial periods based on the co-occurrence of certain of the small mammal species.

Merlin's, Biblins Area and Lady Park Wood Caves

Four other sites were examined and surveyed this year. Three of them (one rockshelter and two caves) lie on the north side of the river between Merlin's Cave and the pedestrian bridge at Biblins (Figure 1, nos. 9-11), the fourth is a cave on the south side of the river (Figure 1, no. 12).

Work at two of them proved unproductive, but a small test trench on the left hand side of the entrance in the third (M-B3, no. 10) produced fossilised bones of horse and a white patinated retouch spall from a flint tool. Unfortunately, much of the deposit inside the cave has been heavily disturbed by earlier mining operations (identified by metal tool marks in the roof) and by subsequent badger burrowing. During the process of the excavation a partly sealed rear entrance to the cave was revealed that might warrant future investigation.

The fourth site is a small north-facing cave located above the Biblins suspension bridge, in Lady Park Wood (Figure 1, no. 12). Its main interest is in the fact that, unlike all of the other Wye Gorge caves so far investigated, it occurs relatively close to river level. The cave also looks attractive as a potential occupation site for several reasons: it affords excellent views in a down-valley direction, it has a potentially large entrance platform and it is high enough to avoid any abnormally high flooding of the river. The operation to clear and prepare the cave for excavation revealed some poorly-preserved and undiagnostic small vertebrate bones just below the ground surface. Due to constraints of time, only minimal excavation took place; further work is anticipated there next season.

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R.N.E. Barton
Department of Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University,
Gipsy Lane Campus, Headington, Oxford OX3 0BP