

FIFTH INTERIM REPORT ON THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS
IN THE WYE VALLEY, 1997
AND
NEW AMS RADIOCARBON DATING RESULTS FROM MADAWG
ROCKSHELTER

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of continuing investigations of caves and rockshelters in the Wye Valley. Excavations near the entrance of King Arthur's Cave produced an *in situ* assemblage of Later Mesolithic artefacts while further finds of Final Upper Palaeolithic type were made in the lower units. Work inside the cave established the disturbed nature of the sediments and examination of two further nearby caves proved archaeologically unproductive. AMS radiocarbon results from Madawg Rockshelter confirm evidence of Later Mesolithic activity at this site.

INTRODUCTION

The fifth season of excavation and survey in the Wye Valley Caves took place from July 13 to August 3 1997. As in previous years the work was organised and directed by Dr Nick Barton, Oxford Brookes University, with funding support from the British Museum, the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries and Brookes University.

The limestone gorge of the Wye has a high density of accessible caves and rockshelters. Over 20 have been investigated since 1993, resulting in the discovery of 12 locations with archaeological and palaeontological deposits, thus more than tripling the number of documented cave sites in the area. In 1997 work was completed at three sites: King Arthur's Cave, Lady Park Wood 1 and Biblins Cave 3 (Figure 1). Small-scale sampling for sediment analysis and dating was also undertaken in the shallow valley in front of King Arthur's Cave and at Symonds Yat East Rockshelter.

AIMS OF FIELDWORK

The project is part of a wider programme of research into patterns of human land use and landscape variation in the Lateglacial and Postglacial periods in Britain. The caves in the Upper Wye Valley preserve some long archaeological sequences and therefore offer opportunities for examining the nature and succession of human activities in the periods concerned. Ultimately, the goal is to identify why certain caves were used in preference to others and how the function of these sites varied through time.

Within the broader scope of the project, specific objectives were identified in 1997:

A. King Arthur's Cave. (Figure 1, no. 2)

To investigate the main entrance of the cave in order to relocate the Reverend Symonds' 1871 excavation trenches (Symonds, 1871, 1872) including, if possible the deep sounding from which Middle Palaeolithic finds had been reported (ApSimon *et al.*, 1992); to sample further archaeologically rich *in situ* deposits outside the cave mouth for occupational evidence relating to the Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Later Prehistoric periods; to complete the examination of the Second Chamber where Mesolithic artefacts had previously been found (Barton, 1996); and to examine the deposits in the field in front of King Arthur's Cave to shed further light on the sedimentological history of the cave and its immediate surroundings.

B. Biblins Cave 3. (Figure 1, no. 11)

To determine the scale and nature of surviving *in situ* deposits in the entrance of the cave, and to obtain further evidence of human use of this site.

C. Lady Park Wood 1 (Figure 1, no. 12)

To test this low-lying cave for evidence of prehistoric human occupation.

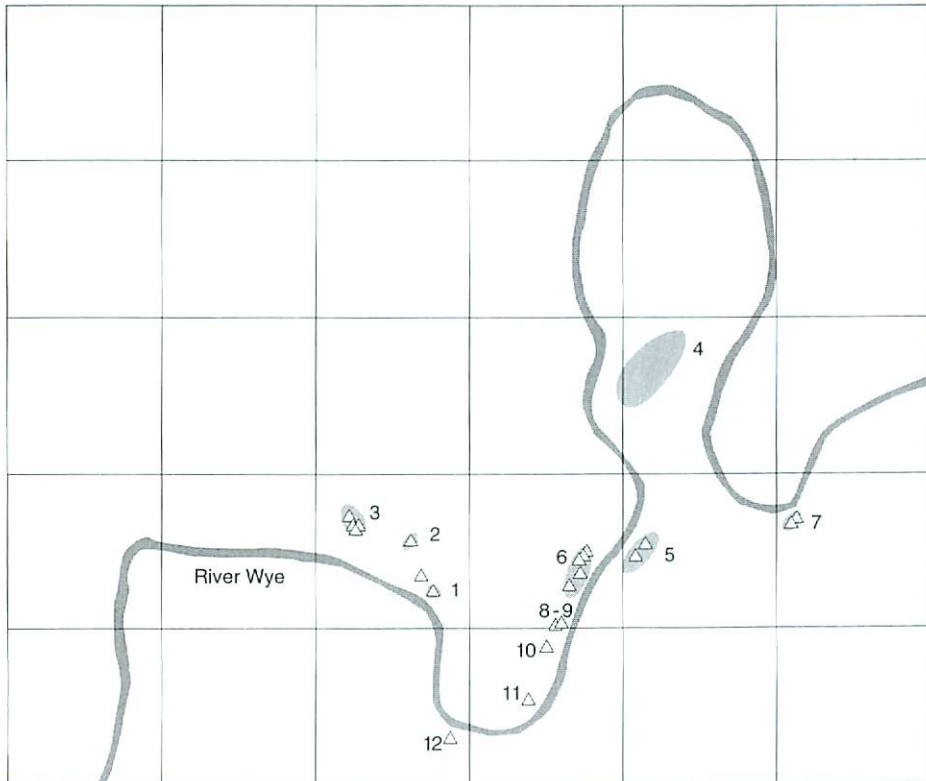


Figure 1. Distribution of current survey areas and documented sites. Key: 1) Madawg Rockshelter; 2) King Arthur's Cave; 3) Little Doward Caves; 4) Huntsham Hill Rockshelters; 5) Symonds Yat East Caves; 6) Symonds Yat West Caves; 7) Coldwell Rocks Caves; 8) Merlin's Cave; 9) MB-1 Rockshelter; 10) MB-2 Cave; 11) MB-3 Cave; 12) Lady Park Wood Cave-1. Grid squares 1 km².

KING ARTHUR'S CAVE 1997

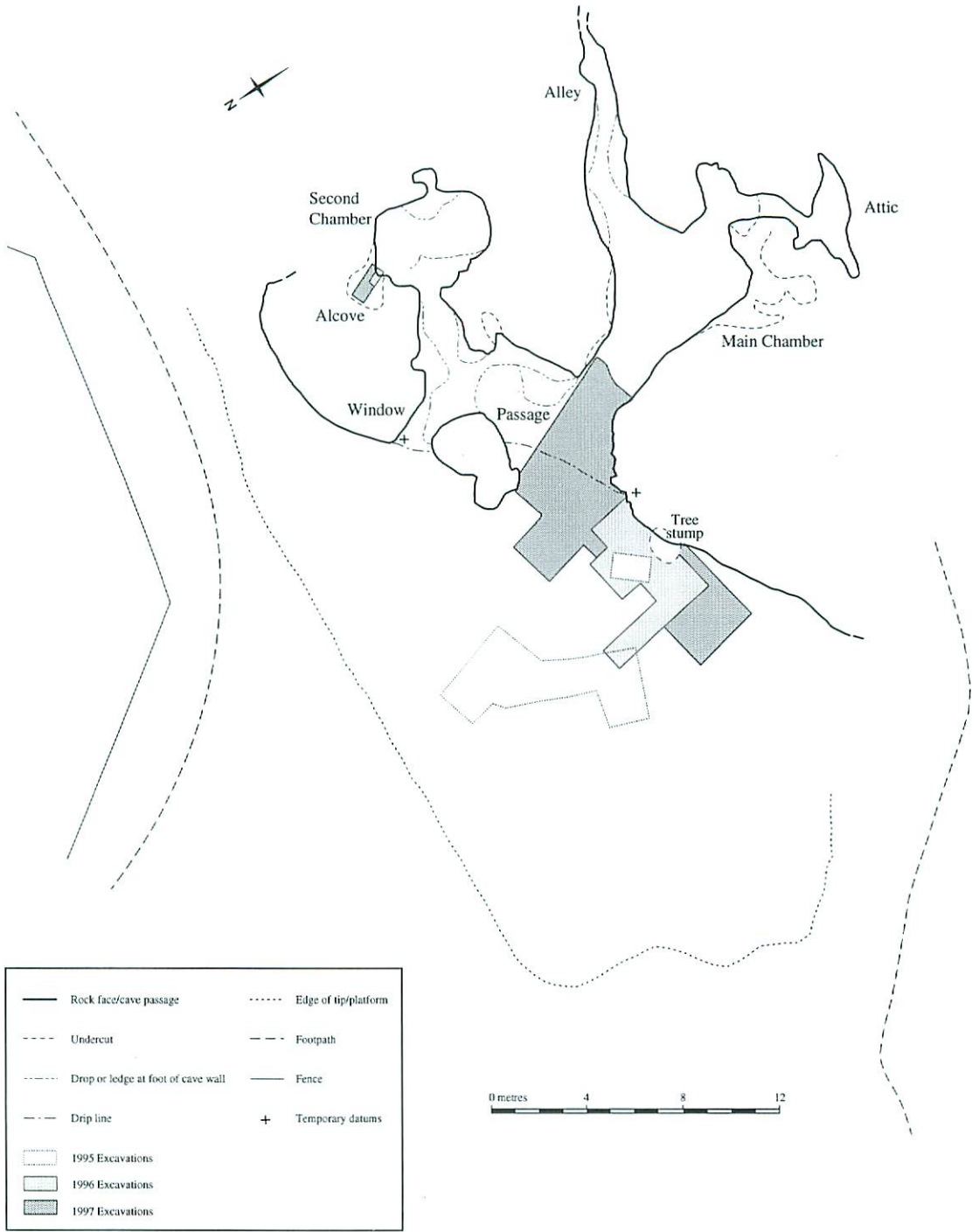


Figure 2. Site plan of King Arthur's Cave showing 1995-7 excavation areas.

D. General survey

Together with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) to provide precise locational details for caves in the survey, including information on the plan, position, elevation and aspect of the caves.

RESULTS

King Arthur's Cave

Major effort was devoted to investigating stratified deposits on the west side of the entrance (Figure 2), where excavations in previous years had identified undisturbed Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Bronze Age occupation evidence, as well as signs of Medieval and post-Medieval iron-smelting (Barton, 1995, 1996).

Of importance this year was the recovery of a small Later Mesolithic microlith assemblage in the upper part of the sequence (Figure 3, nos. 1182, 1006 and 1020-1012). Stratified collections of this age are extremely rare nationally and the finds complement others found inside the cave in 1996, as well as in the neighbouring sites of Madawg Rockshelter (examined in 1993-5) and Merlin's Cave (re-examined in 1996).

Examination of the lower sequence focused on the buried palaeosol (landsurface) and related deposits with Final Upper Palaeolithic archaeology (Barton, 1997). The buried soil was sampled for micromorphology and dating purposes which may provide detailed information on the nature of the soil and the contemporary Lateglacial environment. It now appears likely that the Final Upper Palaeolithic occupation was partly contemporary with the palaeosol but further post-excavation work will be necessary in order to prove this conclusively. The sample of flint tools and waste from this deposit was further increased (Figure 3, nos. 910, 1227, 1326, 877 and 1264) as was the associated animal bone, which included more examples of smashed red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) postcranial remains. Radiocarbon dating on faunal samples should provide confirmation of the age of the assemblage and allow comparison with other Upper Palaeolithic industries elsewhere in Britain and north-west Europe.

Investigations continued in the alcove of the Second Chamber (Figure 2), where last season's work had uncovered numerous Later Mesolithic artefacts including perforated marine shell beads (Barton, 1996, Fig. 5). Further work this year revealed that all the sediments had been disturbed previously. This is unfortunate as the deposits contained artefacts and fossil bones either overlooked or ignored by the earlier excavators. Sieving of these disturbed sediments produced many additional unstratified Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic artefacts including pierced cowrie (*Trivia monacha*) and periwinkle (*Littorina* sp.) shell beads. Together with the nearby site of Madawg Rockshelter this is now the largest existing collection of Later Mesolithic cowrie ornaments from anywhere in the British Isles.

The main entrance of the cave was also examined to locate surviving sections relating to Symonds' 1871 excavations. Several excavation trenches relating to work carried out by the University of Bristol Speleological Society in the 1920's and 1950's (ApSimon, *et al.*, 1992) were revealed as well as areas opened in the 1870's which had evidently been scoured to bedrock. Detailed records were made of the extent of their excavations. Small remnants of undisturbed sediments in the interstices of the bedrock were sampled for sedimentological and microfaunal analysis.

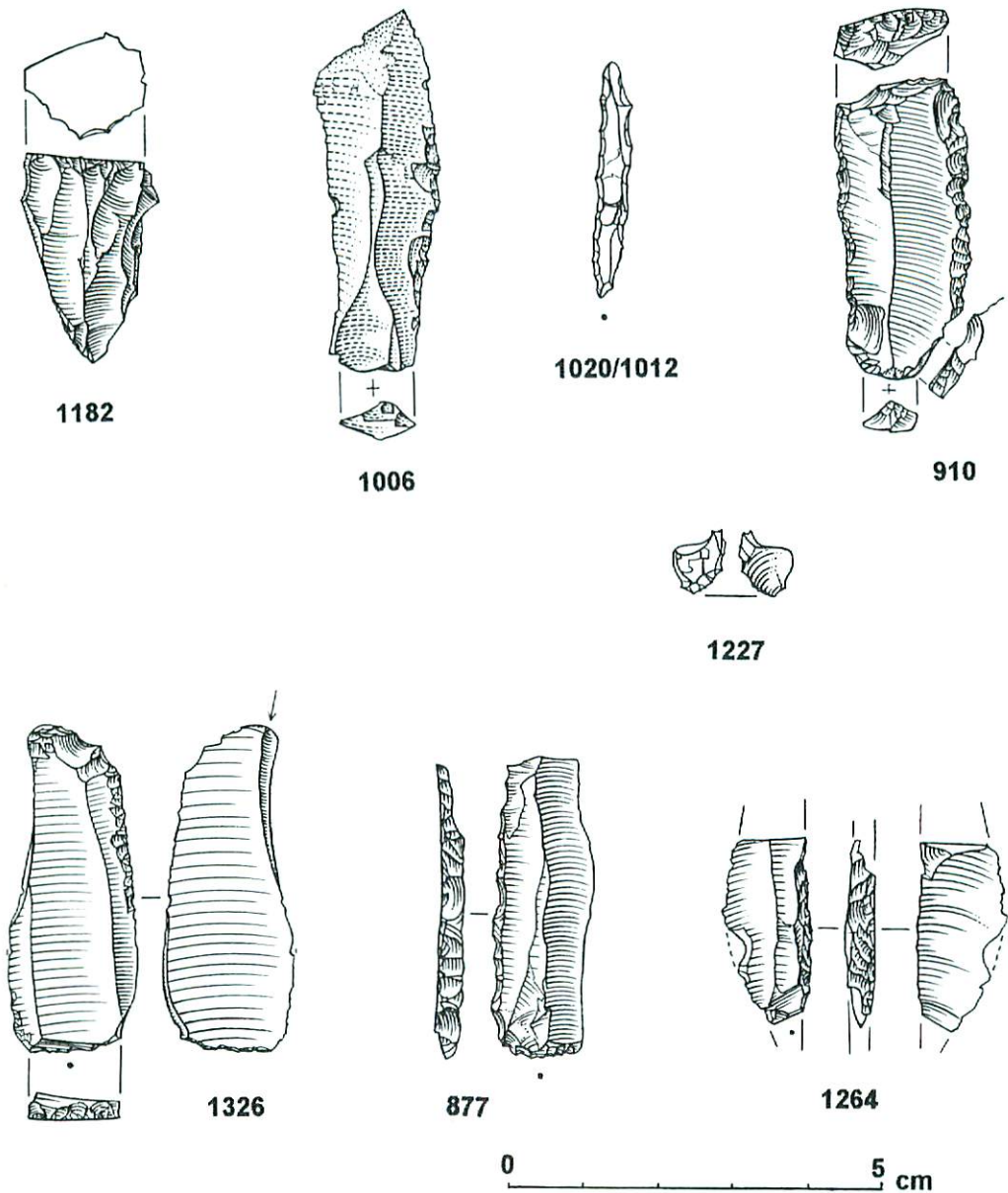


Figure 3. King Arthur's Cave, Later Mesolithic artefacts: 1182 bladelet core; 1006 retouched blade; 1020/1012 bilaterally backed microlith (refitted). Final Upper Palaeolithic artefacts: 910 end-scraper with retouched edges; 1227 broken tip of backed blade; 1326 burin on concave truncation; 877 backed blade with distal truncation; 1264 backed bladelet.

It had been hoped to relocate the deep sounding reported by Symonds, but work this season and in 1996 has shown that the long sequence of sediments indicated by Symonds (1871, 1872) either has not survived or was not accurately recorded by him.

The small valley in front of King Arthur's Cave was investigated by machine trenching. The profile of the dry valley was recorded and sampled for dating. Analysis of the valley sediments will help in interpreting the history of infilling of the dry stream valley, as well as complimenting studies on the nature and sequence of sediments inside the cave.

Bibbins Cave 3

Investigations were concluded at this site. Exploratory work in 1996 produced evidence of undiagnostic Mesolithic or Palaeolithic flintwork in conjunction with fossil faunal remains near the entrance of the cave. The excavations were extended in the mouth of the cave; a larger sample of faunal material was recovered but no further flint artefacts were found. A partly sealed rear-entrance was uncovered but the only finds were of modern bone.

Lady Park Wood 1

This previously unexcavated site was identified last year as one of special potential because of its situation relatively close to the valley floor (though well above the contemporary flood level) and because of its excellent views down-river. It also has an extensive entrance platform which is unusual for caves in the main valley. A deep trench was opened in the mouth of the cave. Despite the reasonably good preservation of Holocene microfaunal remains in the upper levels the rest of the sequence appeared to be archaeologically and palaeontologically sterile. In the event, excavations did not reach the cave floor but had to be halted for safety reasons.

General Survey

A modified GPS (Global Positioning System) satellite-aided survey was made of the caves. The position of each of the sites was mapped by RCHME onto the most detailed available Ordnance Survey map for the area (1:2500). The locational information will provide an accurate framework from which to construct a more detailed analysis of the local context of each of the sites recorded. This will be used to test ideas on the relationship between the topographic position of caves and their function.

NEW AMS RADIOCARBON DATES FROM MADAWG ROCKSHELTER

Madawg rockshelter lies about 350 m south-southeast of King Arthur's Cave and is located on the north side of one of the prominent limestone bluffs which make up the Seven Sisters rocks (Figure 1, no. 1). The rockshelter is just below the plateau edge, it faces almost due west and overlooks the Wye. It is approximately 30 m long with a 9m deep overhang and a roof height of 6 m. The roof slopes inwards and downwards towards the back of the rockshelter. At the rear of the shelter is a major vertical rift, choked with cemented boulder fall and angular limestone debris. Several small horizontal fissures run into the rock wall on either side of the main rift (Figure 4).

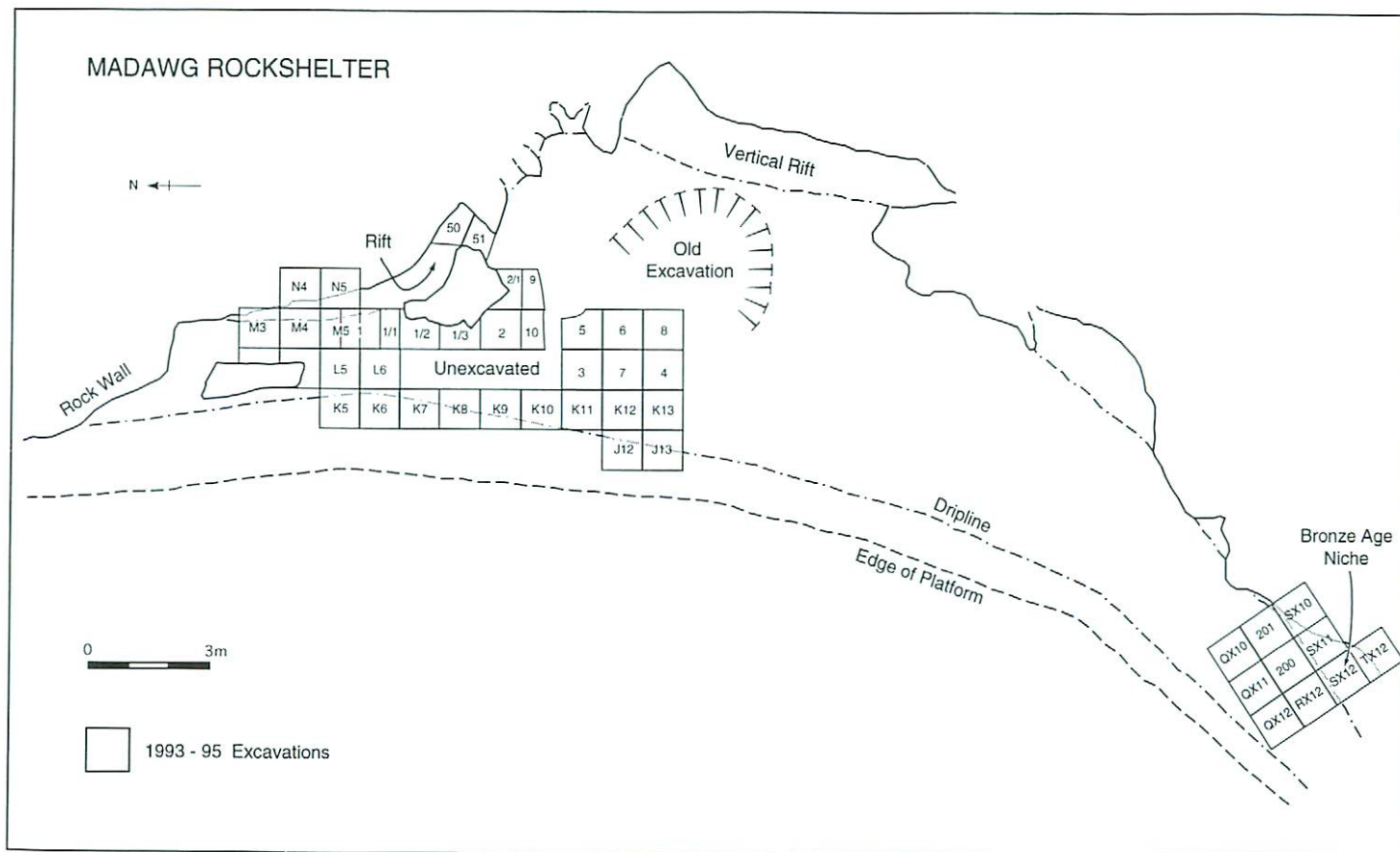


Figure 4. Site plan of Madawg Rockshelter showing 1993-5 excavation areas.

MADAWG ROCKSHELTER SOUTH FACING SECTION J12 - K12

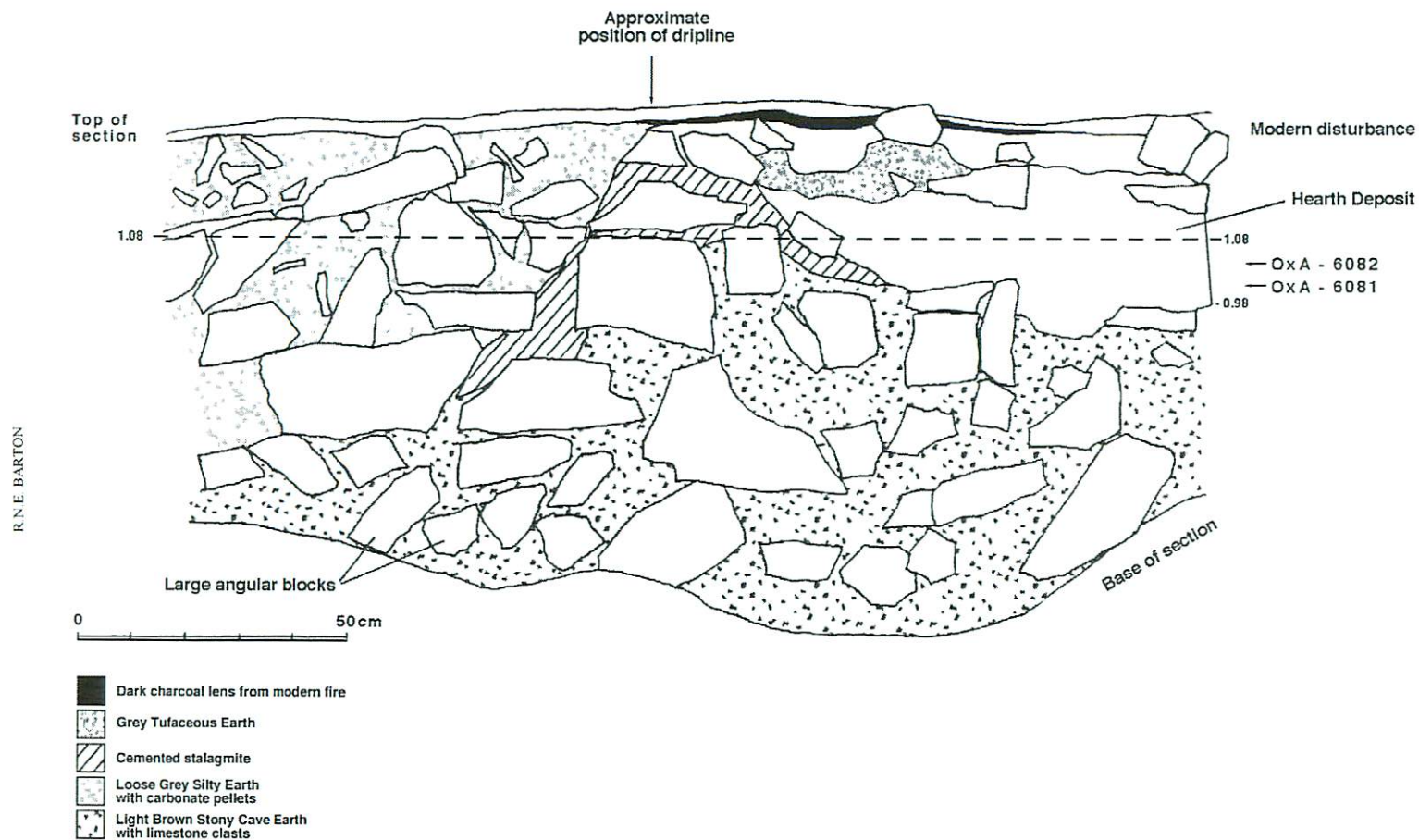


Figure 5. Madawg Rockshelter: schematic section of deposits in squares J12-K12.

As part of the present project, survey and excavation work was undertaken in the shelter in the years 1993 to 1995 (Barton, 1993, 1994, 1995). Exploratory work was followed by more intensive excavation in the northern half of the site which partly overlapping with a pit dug in the 1920's (Figure 4 and Hewer 1926). Excavations revealed a relatively simple upper sequence of deposits consisting of a Grey Tufaceous Earth overlying a Brown Stony Cave Earth. Later Mesolithic artefacts including narrow geometric microliths were recovered from the Brown Stony Cave Earth. A concentration of perforated cowrie shell beads, identical to the ones from King Arthur's Cave, was also recorded in the same layer near the northern end of the main trench (centring on squares L5-L6) (Barton, 1994). Towards the southern end of the trench, the Brown Stony Cave Earth appears progressively darker and within this deposit a charcoal-rich sediment forming a shallow depression about 30 cm deep was observed (Figure 5). The sediments in this feature appear very dark and ashy and were tentatively identified as an undisturbed hearth deposit. However, on the basis of magnetic susceptibility measurements, *in situ* burning can definitely be discounted (S. Collcutt, *pers. comm.*). Various processes may account for the deposit: it could have been emplaced by localised water action or by successive scuffing or trampling (or even deliberate cleaning or dumping activities) Whichever of these formation processes was responsible, the integrity of the deposits implies that the original fireplace cannot have lain very far away.

Analysis of the charred remains by Rowena Gale revealed the upper levels of the feature contained charcoal from the following taxa: ash (*Fraxinus*), oak (*Quercus*), elder (*Sambucus*), pine (*Pinus*) and yew (*Taxus*); hazelnut shell (*Corylus*) was also present. Charred wood was much sparser in the lower levels (below 110 cm) and consisted of pine (*Pinus*) and yew (*Taxus*). Also identified in the lower levels (Wendy Carruthers, *pers. comm.*) were the stones of hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.) and sloe/blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). A burnt microlithic scalene triangle, a bladelet and several other burnt flint fragments were also recovered in the lower levels. Some microfaunal remains were likewise recovered in this context as well as the surrounding Brown Stony Cave Earth. They comprise wood mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) and bank vole (*Clethrionomys glareolus*) both of which are indicators of closed deciduous woodland (C. Price *pers. comm.*) and support the idea that the firewood was collected locally.

Two AMS radiocarbon dates were obtained on charred specimens from the lower levels of the depression:

OxA-6081	charred sloe stone (MDG 527)	8710 ± 70 BP
OxA-6082	charred hazelnut shell (MDG 528)	6655 ± 65 BP

These dates are somewhat difficult to interpret. Although they do not overlap at one standard deviation, the possibility of mixing is thought to be unlikely because the specimens were separated by a depth of 7 cm and are dated in the correct stratigraphic order. Rather, it implies that the infilling of the depression was not a discrete event but consisted of separate accumulation episodes. It is interesting to note that a diagnostically Later Mesolithic burnt narrow scalene triangle was recovered within the same 2 cm spit as the earlier of the two dated samples. OxA-6081 is of particular significance because it is the earliest directly dated record of sloe/blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) in the British Holocene flora.

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