

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTE:
SKELETAL MATERIAL RECOVERED FROM
TYNING'S GREAT SWALLET,
CHARTERHOUSE-ON-MENDIP,
SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

A cave dig in Tynning's Great Swallet has recovered a quantity of human and animal bone and a single flint tool. These appear to be late Neolithic in age, although the nature of the dig and slumping of the deposit have prevented detailed interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Tynning's Great Swallet (NGR ST 47655610) is a doline just to the south of the entrances of G.B. Cavern and Charterhouse Cave. It has been interpreted as the sink for a invasion vadose cave, now fossilised, which is likely to intercept the continuation of Charterhouse Cave between that cave's current terminal choke and its junction with G.B. Cavern somewhere beneath the terminal boulder choke of the latter (Smart *et al.*, 1984).

The site was first investigated by the Society in the 1920s and again in the early 1950s at which time the eastern section of cave passage (see Figure 2) was opened up. Digging here was abandoned when the passage closed down to a narrow impassable crack. This point was at the bottom of the slope below the entrance. The current dig, from the western entrance, was begun in January 1985 and has continued sporadically since then. During the spring and summer of 2004, a significant amount of progress was made and in the course of this a quantity of skeletal material was recovered from within the fill.

Digging in the swallet has shown that it appears to be a large shaft, infilled from above, which the diggers have followed down close to its southern wall. Figure 1 gives a somewhat schematic cross section of the shaft and Figure 2 shows the plan form of the cave. It would seem to be similar in formation to the entrance shaft of Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet (Levitan *et al.* 1988), but see below for a discussion of this similarity.

The material so far recovered has been found at approximate depths of 10 m to 30 m within a fill of limestone clasts, mud and some sandstone cobbles.

Human remains:

The human material is very incomplete though all parts of the body seem to be represented. There are probably three individuals present.

- 10 skull fragments including parts of right temporal bone, occipital, parietal, and frontal bones and palate

- Tooth, upper left canine
- Left clavicle
- ?Left humerus head very eroded
- Right humerus fragment including part of olecranon fossa
- Right radius, distal half, missing styloid, adult size
- Right radius, distal third, medium
- Right radius, distal half, small
- Left ulna, proximal half, missing joint surfaces
- Left trapezium
- 2 proximal hand phalanges very slender ? female
- ?Central fragment of rib
- Lumbar vertebra, possibly L1, marked osteoarthritis
- Left femoral head
- ?Patella very eroded
- Left talus (astragalus) (approx foot size UK 7-8)
- Great toe phalange

Artefacts:

One artefact has been recovered; a flint thumb scraper which has been identified as probably late Neolithic in age. The only other artefact discovered in the cave was a screw top from a beer bottle labelled *Ashton Gate Brewery Ltd* which has been identified as dating no later than 1924. This was discovered close to the surface shortly after digging operations commenced and it is possible that it was left by early UBSS members.

Faunal remains:

The faunal material is listed below. Faunal remains are greater in quantity than the human ones, the majority are of bovids. A full catalogue is available in the Society's Museum. The shaft contains no animals which would be inconsistent with a late Neolithic date, as indicated by the flint.

- **Bovid:** (Domestic): Numerous teeth, rib & vertebral fragments, metatarsals, horn core
- **Bovid:** (*Bos primigenius*): Large Atlas vertebra
- **Pig:** Teeth, Tibia, proximal end?

- **Sheep:** Teeth
- **Horse:** Teeth
- **Red Deer:** Teeth
- **Canid:** Skull fragment, teeth and lower jaw
- **Small rodent or rabbit:** Tibia, Scapula, Vertebra, Left lower jaw
- **Bat:** (?recent, seen but lost in spoil)

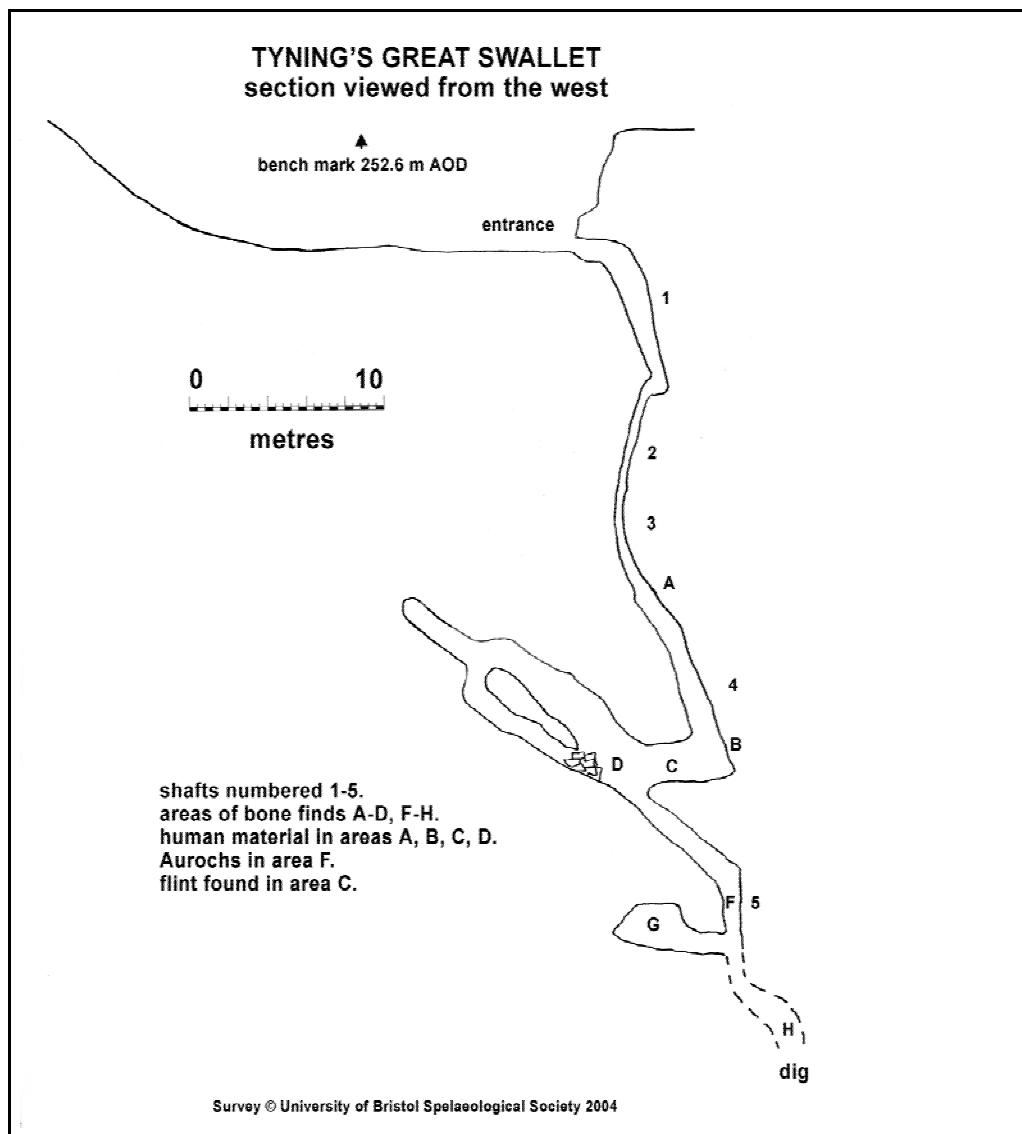


Figure 1. *Schematic cross-section through Tynings Great Swallet.*

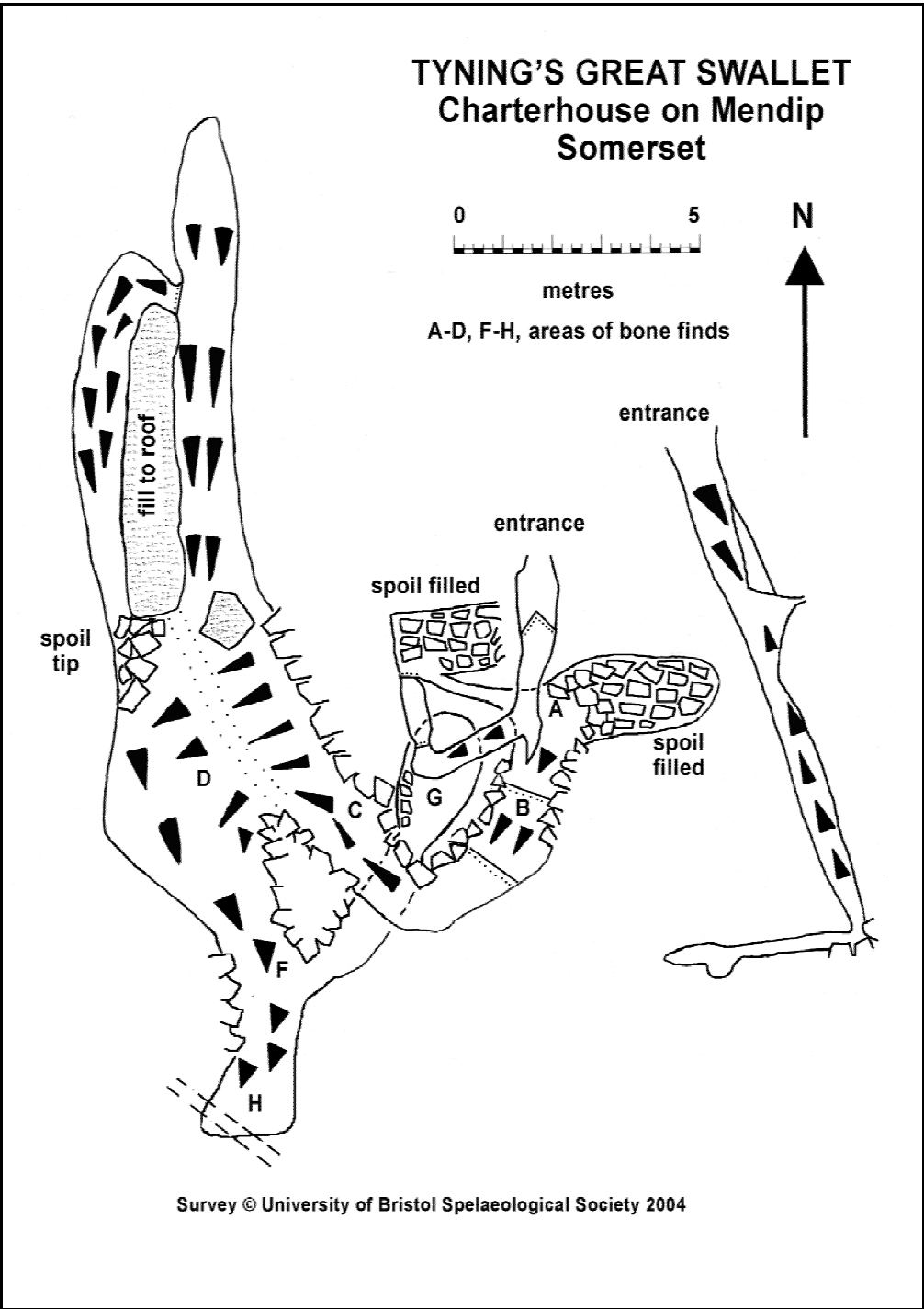


Figure 2. *Plan Survey of Tynings Great Swallet.*

DISCUSSION

This cave has not been systematically excavated as an archaeological site and no proper stratigraphic record has been made. That and the paucity of artefacts make it very difficult to determine both what the original depositional context (or contexts) and the date of deposition may have been. However, the associated faunal material and the single flint find suggest that a date at the end of the Neolithic is probable.

One thing that can be stated with certainty is that neither the human nor the animal material arrived at the site of their deposition by the same route that the explorers took, as our access shaft has required enlargement to make it passable. Their position is at the edge of deep shaft, up to 10 m by 10 m across. All the finds have come from a minimum of 15 m below the cave entrance, 20 m below the lip of the depression. The find might be interpreted in this way: In late Neolithic times the site was an open shaft, possibly a collapse doline of up to 30 m depth, with a floor of stones and soil. The human and faunal remains were deposited by an unknown process at this time and the shaft was filled to within 5 m of the surface over time. Whether this process was natural or due to human activity cannot be judged. Subsequent to the deposition, the shaft fill has been undermined and partially washed out by the Charterhouse Cave stream which passes beneath. This has caused the finds to have probably been scattered through a larger area than that in which they were originally deposited. It also, however, increases the difficulties of interpretation.

The closest local parallels would seem to be with the Late Neolithic horizon at Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet (Levitan, *et al.* 1988) and the Early Bronze Age deposit at Brimble Pit Swallet (Lewis, 2000). Both of these have been interpreted as being intentional deposits. It may be that a more complete excavation of the Great Swallet would cast more light on these matters but this would be a significant undertaking.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

HUMAN BONE FROM CHARTERHOUSE CAVE

In the course of this work Charterhouse cave was visited in order to survey the terminal boulder ruckle dig to see how it relates to the position of the Great Swallet. During the course of this visit one piece of bone, subsequently tentatively identified as the distal half of a human right tibia, was recovered. It was found at the end of the streamway, just at the start of the terminal boulder choke. It is probably not associated with the Great Swallet deposits but is reported here for completeness.

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