

H.P. WYNDHAM AND THE “LOST CAVE OF BURRINGTON”

by

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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that “H.W.”, the anonymous author of a note which accidentally gave rise to the idea of a “lost cave of Burrington”, may have been the antiquarian, H.P. Wyndham, of Salisbury.

The mystery of the “lost cave of Burrington”, which originated in a note published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1805 was solved 50 years ago by Desmond Donovan and the late George Boon (Boon and Donovan, 1954). They showed that the supposed cave, said to have contained the remains of a hundred human burials and thus a possible parallel to Aveline's Hole, discovered in 1797, was actually ‘Fairy Toot’, the Neolithic chambered tomb in Nempnett Thrubwell parish, 5 km from Burrington, which had been investigated in 1789 by the Rev. Thomas Bere, Rector of Butcombe.

The confusion had arisen through the misreading by an early nineteenth century historian, Samuel Seyer, of an inexplicit secondary reference to Fairy Toot, added to the account of the discovery in 1805 of a Bronze Age flanged bronze axehead in a cave in Burrington Combe. That account, published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was signed only “H.W.”. From the internal evidence of the account (H.W., 1805), Boon and Donovan concluded that “H.W.” was not a person living locally or well acquainted with the Burrington - Blagdon area, but were unable to suggest who he or she might have been.

It is possible that “H.W.” was Henry Penruddock Wyndham (1736-1819) of Salisbury, MP for Wiltshire. Wyndham was known at the time as a writer of topographic surveys and of books concerning Wiltshire history and also for his antiquarian and archaeological interests. In the years around 1800-02, Wyndham had been one of the gentleman patrons of William Cunnington (1754-1810), whose excavation of over 200 barrows on Salisbury Plain furnished data for Sir Richard Colt Hoare's *History of Ancient Wiltshire* (Hoare, 1810-12). During the period of their collaboration Cunnington had excavated in at least two Neolithic long barrows. In one, Bowl's Barrow, near Heytesbury, he found a large quantity of human remains, including “a piece of skull that appeared to have been cut off by a sword”. Cunnington tactfully suggested in his letter of 18 July 1801 to “H.P. Wyndham, Esq” (Cunnington, 1924, 431-2), that these finds offered, “another proof of your [Wyndham's] hypothesis that these very large oblong [Long] Barrows are Battle Barrows” though further on he noted cogent arguments against the hypothesis.

These discoveries might have provided a motive for Wyndham taking an interest in the details of Thomas Bere's investigation of the Fairy Toot long barrow, and contact may have been established between them at this time, a few years before the discovery of the bronze axe. Such contacts are by no means unlikely; one of the subscribers to Rutter's *Delineations ... of ... Somerset* (1829), ‘perhaps the best known authority for the “lost cave”...’, was Henry's son, Wadham Wyndham, of Salisbury (ibid. 339).

Unfortunately, the extant archaeological correspondence of H.P. Wyndham consists only of a few copies of letters preserved with the Cunnington correspondence, which is held in

the library of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society in Devizes Museum. Enquiries of Salisbury Museum, the Dorset Record Office and the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office have been answered in the negative and a search of the national *Access to Archives* database (www.a2a.org.uk) has produced nothing relevant.

It is thus not possible to substantiate this suggestion, but this note is offered in the hope that there may still be Wyndham correspondence in private hands which might contain valuable information about this and other archaeological topics.

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