

EXCAVATIONS IN LONG HOLE, CHEDDAR, FEBRUARY 1977.

by

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ABSTRACT

In 1977, the Society carried out a brief excavation in the Long Hole, a cave located immediately above the main Cheddar show cave Gough's Cave, with the hope of locating a significant Pleistocene deposit. Little Pleistocene material was found, but human and animal bone and a small archaeological assemblage of probable Roman age were recovered. This find was never followed up and has not been published elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

Long Hole, also known as the Roman Cave owing to the quantity of Roman coinage said to have been found there, is located immediately above the well-known show cave and rich archaeological site of Gough's cave close to the lower, western end of Cheddar Gorge. It has not undergone the extensive archaeological investigations that the lower cave has, mainly because the cave has "always" been accessible, as evidenced by graffiti dating back to 1668 and it has thus been subject to the depredations of treasure hunters and plunderers in early modern times. Some archaeological work can be documented, however and is outlined below.

The Late Nineteenth Century.

The earliest known modern investigation took place in about 1890 (Anon, 1911). Excavations were apparently undertaken at that time by the Gough family but little is known about what was found. Unfortunately, although there is material attributed to Long Hole in the Cheddar Caves museum, these attributions are unreliable. Apparently when the material was displayed in the old museum alongside the cave entrance, vibration from passing lorries used to move both finds and artefacts around within the displays and all reliable connection between the material and the labels was lost (W.I. Stanton *pers. comm.*).

Excavations in "The Slitter", 1911.

The slope up to the entrance of Long Hole is known as "The Slitter". Prior to the works associated with the commercialisation of Gough's Cave and the construction of the restaurant building, this was a steep talus slope leading from the Gorge up to the ledge outside Long Hole. It is reported that crude steps were cut into the upper part of it and in the seventeenth century someone reportedly rode a horse up to Long Hole (D.J. Irwin, *pers. comm.*).

In April 1911, Arthur Gough was excavating material from this slope to surface the coach park further up the Gorge when he discovered a cache of Roman coins, along with some human remains. The coins were reported on by Boon (1957) and the human skulls by Tratman (1955). The latter are conserved in the Society's Museum.



Figure 1. *The 1911 Excavations in “The Slitter”.*
From the collection of the late D.J. Irwin.

Wilson (2005) for Goatchurch Cavern, back to markings of possible Mesolithic age. As yet, only the Mesolithic engravings have been reported on (Mullan and Wilson; 2005, 2006). Although no further excavation was done at this time, these finds demonstrate the continuing use of the site over a very long period of time.

THE 1977 EXCAVATIONS

Most of the information in this section is derived from a log of the excavation written by Tratman, the Society’s museum catalogue and the finds themselves.

Despite the disappointing results of the 1960 trial, Tratman still felt that the cave had potential and believed that there was a good chance of further, undisturbed, Pleistocene

Excavation in the entrance to Long Hole, 1960.

Three trial trenches were dug in the entrance area of the cave in 1960. These were reported on by Tratman in 1966, but had been summarised in succinct fashion by Gilbert (1961) as follows:

“Trial trenches have been started in the Long Hole, Cheddar, but the evidence so far is that the whole of the upper layers have been hopelessly disturbed and the lower material is barren.”

This has been the common perception of the archaeological potential of this site since that time. (See for example, Jacobi, 2004)

Rock Art studies in Long Hole, 2004.

In 2004, as part of an ongoing investigation of Mendip cave sites, a series of engravings on the cave’s walls were recorded. These range from relatively modern graffiti through early modern inscriptions, including a date of 1668 and apotropaic marks of the type described by Binding and

deposits being discovered. Pleistocene material had been found at various places within the cave and in secondary deposits derived from Long Hole found in Gough's Old Cave and in The Slitter. Within the cave he felt that Pleistocene material was falling from a choke in an ascending passage on the north side of the cave, "about 60-80 m from the entrance" and accumulating in a sharp angular scree at the foot of a stalagmite floor. Two thin stalagmite floors, broken through by earlier diggers, were noted in the 1960 excavations, but Tratman felt that this stalagmite was comparable with that which sealed the Late Upper Palaeolithic/Pleistocene deposits in Gough's Cave (see Donovan, 2007). The objective of the 1977 excavation was to investigate this scree "in an attempt to find more remains of Pleistocene animals."

The work was carried out on the 26th February 1977 and by the end of the day, a trench about 2m long and 1 m wide had been excavated. The following stratigraphy has been reconstructed from Tratman's notes:

Angular scree	25 cm thick
trampled (compacted) floor	5-8 cm thick
Angular scree	? 25 cm thick
Second compact layer	bottom not reached

The log notes that "the edge of the lower compact layer was found and immediately post Pleistocene objects began to be found including Victorian (?) Pins, pot sherds, animal and human bones but by this time it was 1600 hrs and work had started at 10.00 and a lunch break of only 0.5 hr. The area of bones was covered with scree and the party left."

The Finds.

Tratman listed the finds as follows:

5 phalanges probably *Ursus*.

1 very worn incisor of large carnivore, probably *Ursus*.

1 femur of small rodent (about the size of a mouse).

½ pelvis of small rodent (about the size of a mouse).

3 sherds of top of vessel. Black surface burnished. Not it seems wheel made.

Part of human fibula and clavicle and ? Skull.

Various fragments of animal bones.

Bone scrap -mixed recent/Pleistocene.

Several pins temporarily held by RH (two were discarded, perhaps foolishly, by EKT).

With the exception of the pins, all this material is still extant in the Society's Museum. The pottery is very similar to Roman material from Gough's Cave held in the Cheddar Caves Museum. It is, however, almost certainly wheel made. Samples of soil were collected and washed through graded sieves, dried and examined. No molluscs, bones or teeth were seen and the material was discarded.

CONCLUSIONS

Tratman noted that "Tentatively the quantity of Pleistocene material does not warrant continuation of excavation for this purpose unless the stal flow extends outwards as a floor, intact. The human bones and pottery indicate a burial and this should be followed up. It could

be that the burial was just laid on the surface and could have been disturbed by visitors. It could, though less likely, indicate a cemetery.” Sadly Tratman was never in a position to follow up on this work and died the following year. No further excavations have taken place within the cave.

It is my opinion that the degree of disturbance indicated by both the 1960 and 1977 excavations support Tratman’s conclusions that further work on the Pleistocene deposits is unlikely to prove useful. As far as the post-Pleistocene deposits, especially the human remains, are concerned, it may be that more light could be thrown on the use of the cave in the pre-Roman and Roman periods. This, too, may seem doubtful but as the discovery of this material was wholly unexpected it is difficult to be certain.

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