

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF THE DISCOVERY OF AVELINE'S HOLE, BURRINGTON COMBE, NORTH SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

Five previously unknown accounts of the discovery of the cave are presented. Two of these are recently discovered newspaper accounts and the other three are letters written by the poet Robert Southey dating from immediately before and after his visit to the cave on 27th January 1797. In these letters Southey refutes the accuracy of details given in other, still untraced, accounts and presents his own observations.

INTRODUCTION

An extensive account of the discovery of Aveline's Hole, Burrington Combe, North Somerset is given by Schulting et. al. (2005) as part of their re-analysis of the human remains from the site.

At the time that paper was written, the only known contemporary account of the discovery of the cave was a short report in the *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser* on Monday 16th January 1797 (Anon., 1797a), which is reproduced later for the sake of completeness.

In the course of other research, references to Aveline's Hole were found in some early letters by Robert Southey, recently published online (Pratt 2007). Robert Southey, a member of the romantic school of poets and Poet Laureate from 1813 until his death in 1843, was born in Bristol in 1774, and retained his connection with the city, often staying there with his grandmother in Bedminster as a child during school holidays. He was in Bristol and the surrounding area in January 1797, visiting a friend, whilst waiting to commence his legal studies in London. During that time he wrote two letters to a friend in London on the subject of the cave and its contents, and a further letter, later published in the *Monthly Magazine*, which reveal that he visited Aveline's Hole within three weeks of its discovery.

The first letter, to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, Lincoln's Inn, London, (Southey 1797a)¹, states: *to night I return to Bristol We are going to see the skeletons of which you may have seen some account in the papers.* The reference in this letter to 'papers' in the plural led the authors to believe that more than one account of the discovery might have been published and so a search was conducted in as many contemporary publications as could be traced.

Two previously unknown newspaper articles were discovered: one in the *Bath Herald & Register* on Saturday 21st January 1797 (Anon., 1797b) and the other in the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* on Thursday 26th January 1797 (Anon., 1797c). However the additional

¹ Wynn, Charles Watkin Williams 1775–1850. Wynn met Southey at Westminster School and the two remained friends for rest of their lives. He entered Lincoln's Inn in 1795 and was called to the Bar in 1798. From 1806–1807, he served in The Ministry of All The Talents (led by his uncle Lord Grenville) and secured a pension for Southey.

material now available does not answer all the questions which arise and indeed casts doubt on the actual date of discovery, previously believed to have been Sunday 8th January 1797.

Various other newspapers were checked, (see Appendix), in Bath, Bristol, Gloucester and Taunton Libraries, but no further accounts have been found to date.

THE SOURCES

These are given here in date order, with publication dates for the newspaper accounts. The day of the week has been noted in each case next to the date, for clarity.

a. 16th (Monday) January 1797 *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser*.

Yesterday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Coombe, they observed it take shelter in a small crevice of the rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pickaxe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern, the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and embossed with whimsical concreted forms. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, lying promiscuously, almost converted into stone.- Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford, Somersetshire. (Anon 1797a)

This is the account from which a discovery date of Sunday 8th January 1797 has always been taken: however this date has now been called into question by the newly- discovered accounts. An identical account, with the exception of the first two words, appeared in a letter to the editor of the *Sporting Magazine* published in the February edition the following month (Anon., 1797d). See source g.

b. 21st (Saturday) January 1797, *Bath Herald & Register*.

Friday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Combe, they observed it to take shelter in a small crevice of the rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pickaxe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern, the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and embossed with whimsical concreted forms. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, lying promiscuously, almost converted into stone.- Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford, Somersetshire. (Anon 1797b)

This report raises the possibility that the date of the discovery might have been Friday 13th January 1797.

c. 26th (Thursday) 1797, *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette*.

Sunday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Combe, they observed it take shelter in a small crevice of a rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pick-axe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern; the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and imbossed with whimsical concreted forms. – From the dome ascends a petrefaction, in the figure of an inverted cone; this is nearly met by another of similar shape, which arises from the floor immediately beneath, and emits, upon being struck, a very loud and musical sound. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, (now almost converted into stone) not placed in regular order, but lying promiscuously. The country people, who in great numbers flocked to visit this wonderful cemetery, had begun their depredations; but a neighbouring gentleman has, with great liberality and propriety, caused a door to be fitted to the entrance, in order to preserve it perfect as possible, as a treat for the Naturalist and Antiquarian. -- Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford. (Anon 1797c)

This account introduces another possible date for the discovery, in this case Sunday 15th January 1797. In addition, this is the first reference to a sonorous stalactite, mentioned later by Gibbes (1799 & 1800a, b & c), and is also the first mention of a door having been placed on the cave, something which is not mentioned in any other known account of the cave and its contents. The use of the word *ascends* in the account makes no sense and should probably be read as *descends*.

This article was reprinted in *The Monthly Mirror* for January 1797 (Anon 1797e). The only differences are that the words *On Sunday last* are substituted for the words *Sunday se'nnight*, and there are minor changes in punctuation.

d. 26th (Thursday) 1797, extract from letter from Southey to Wynn. (Southey 1797a)

..... to night I return to Bristol to visit the only friend² I have there. you know that now I do not rashly use the word. we are going to see the skeletons of which you may have seen some account in the papers – you may expect a true & particular account.....

e. 28th (Saturday) 1797, letter from Southey to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine*, published in February 1797 (Southey 1797b)³.

² **Danvers, Charles** (d. 1814) is a likely candidate for the friend who went with Southey to Aveline's Hole. He was a Bristol wine merchant distantly related to the regicides Sir John Danvers and General Thomas Harrison, and to the diarist Celia Fiennes. Danvers knew Southey from childhood. In 1797, their friendship flourished when Southey and his wife lodged in a house in Oxford Street, Kingsdown, next door to Danvers and his mother.

³ This letter was published anonymously in the *Monthly Magazine* (Southey 1797b). The manuscript of the letter has not survived, but it duplicates material in the following letter, written the next day, to Charles Watkins Williams Wynn, and has recently been attributed to Southey by Lynda Pratt (Pratt 2007). The rest of the volume has been searched for possible replies, but none have been found.

“AS many exaggerated accounts have appeared of the cavern lately discovered at Burrington-Coombe, in Somersetshire, an authentic description may perhaps be acceptable to your readers.

It was related in the newspapers, that thirty skeletons were discovered, perfect, and lying north and south, the bones cemented to the rock: but neither was there any perfect skeleton, or any apparent regularity in the mode of laying them. The entrance to the cavern is by a steep descent: from the irregular manner in which the skulls lie, it appears, that the bodies were thrown down carelessly; and I am confirmed in this opinion, by observing, that though the cavern extends one hundred and thirty feet, there are no bones further in than a body thrown from the aperture would have fallen; none of the smaller bones remain. The skulls are incrustated with Stalactydes⁴, and crumble away when an attempt is made to remove them

A sepulchral vault was discovered, some few years back, near Nimlet, in the neighbourhood, but it has been destroyed, and the bones used in a lime-kiln near! Of this I could get no other information. In the parish of Budcome there is another, which I visited; it is shaped thus;

[SKETCH OF AN OPEN CROSS]

and extends about ten feet either way. Many bones were lying there, but as it is long since it was opened, I could learn nothing of the position in which they were found. The vault is very rudely constructed: it is on a level with the field, covered over with stones and rubbish, but so irregularly, as to present no appearance of a tumulus.

I shall be obliged to any of your readers who can inform me, at what period these modes of sepulture were common.

B.

Bristol, Jan. 28.

f. 29th (Sunday) January 1797, letter from Southey to Wynn. (Southey 1797c)

Sunday. Jan^y. 29th

I returned last night & your letter arrived this morning. you say the sooner I come the better. I have little to arrange & will be with you by the end of the week.

Concerning these skeletons I have displayed a perseverance that would have done honor even to the scientific avidity of Horse Campbell.⁵ the weather prevented our journey for a fortnight. we got there however on Friday last. the accounts have been enormously exaggerated. the cavern (a natural one) descends steeply – from the number of human bones it has evidently been a place of burial. from the way in which the skulls lie I believe that the bodies

⁴ Stalactydes is an unusual spelling, not found in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is used by Southey in the manuscript letters, but has been corrected closer to the usual form, [St]alactytes, in one published version of the Monthly Magazine, held by the Astor Library in New York, although Stalactydes remains in the copy at Princeton University, New Jersey.

⁵ **Campbell, Henry ‘Horse’** (1774–?): A university friend of Southey’s although they did not keep in touch in later life. Their last meeting was at Falmouth in 1801, when Campbell was on his way to take up a living as a clergyman in Antigua.

were thrown carelessly down the descent, & left to lie as they fell – another reason for my supposing this is that, tho the cavern ~~xx-xxx~~ penetrates 130 feet, there are no bones farther down than a body thrown in would have fallen, no entire skeleton was found – nor did I observe any of the smaller bones. these have mouldered away - & the skulls crumbled with the slightest blow. the droppings of the cavern had encrusted them with stalactydes. [see footnote, page above]

I had been directed to enquire of the clergyman of Blagdon (3 miles from ~~Burr~~ Burrington Coombe where the cavern was discovered) for some tidings of a place of burial in his neighbourhood discovered about four years ago. he was dangerously ill & of course I did not intrude upon the family with my questions. I enquired of the villagers – there was something at Nimlett-a sort of an imitation of that at Burrington- one girl said no – it was at Budcomb. we enquired again. it had been at Nimlett: it was built by [MS torn] & had been pulld down for a neighbouring lime ki [MS torn] Budcomb was in our way home. We enquired there at last – a woman in a most wretched state of poverty gave us some information. one of her children showd us the way – we got candle & matches - & set off with firebrands for near half a mile. it was a rudely covered vault thus shaped

[SKETCH OF AN OPEN CROSS]

about ten feet either way. There were many bones. it had been covered with stones – but the mound was low & irregularly shaped – such as gave no reason to imagine a tumulus below.

So much for the dead. - I have received Bedford's book this morning – he has much amended it since I saw the manuscript.

I am in hourly expectation of receiving the Letters. but will not lose the post in [MS torn] taining this for the parcel.

farewell. I shall see you at the end of the week.

R Southey.

g. February 1797, *The Sporting Magazine*. (Anon 1797d, and reprinted in Norris & Mayo, 1890)

January 9, as two young men were persuing a rabbit in Burrington Coombe, they observed it take shelter in a small crevice of the rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pickaxe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage, leading to a large and lofty cavern, the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and embossed with whimsical concreted forms. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, laying promiscuously, almost converted into stone.- Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford, Somersetshire.

The Sporting Magazine is the only one of the sources to give a definite date for the discovery, which is stated to have been Monday 9th January 1797.

DISCUSSION

On what date was the cave discovered?

Prior to the discovery of the newspaper reports detailed in b. and c. above, it had generally been assumed that the date of the discovery of the cave was Sunday 8th January 1797, as this was the date given in the only known report, contained in the *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser*.

However, three newspaper reports are now available rather than one, and each of these reports now appear to refer to a different date, namely 8th (Sunday), 13th (Friday) and 15th (Sunday). As the reprint of the first report in *the Sporting Magazine* refers to the 9th (Monday), this presents a fourth possibility. Southey's letters do not provide any assistance on this point and do not enable us to make an informed decision between any of the possible dates, although they may make the later dates less likely. It is impossible to be sure when the reports themselves were actually written, submitted for publication or indeed typeset by the newspapers and it seems likely that delays between the accounts being written and/or typeset may account for these discrepancies. It is not known whether the editors would have taken into account the actual date of writing when adjusting the wording used in each report. If however we assume that no work was done on a Sunday, Anon 1797a may even imply a date as early as Friday 6th, as would Anon 1797b if that article was typeset before Friday 20th. The editor of Anon 1797c may have assumed the day of discovery from the publication date of Anon 1797a. It is also possible that the editors of later accounts may have preferred to represent the discovery as having taken place at a later date to lend a greater immediacy to their account.

From one of Southey's letters (1797c) it is clear that he visited the cave on Friday 27th January. From this it appears possible that the report of the discovery which led to Southey's interest in the cave could have been the one that appeared on Monday 16th January in the *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser* (Anon 1797a). However, additional details given in Southey's letter to the *Monthly Magazine*, refer to details in newspapers that do not appear to be any of the extant accounts. It is also clear from Southey's letter to Wynn that he had been waiting for a fortnight for the weather to improve before making his visit, therefore the accounts in the *Bath Herald & Register*, and the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* cannot have been the ones which led to his initial desire to visit the cave.

Have any or all of the reports seen by Southey been traced?

Southey's first letter to Wynn presumes it is possible that his friend may have seen 'some account in the papers' of the discovery. The use of the word 'papers' in the plural is significant and implies that more than one newspaper carried a report of the discovery. In addition, in his letter to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine*, Southey states that 'many exaggerated accounts have appeared'. Again, 'accounts' is plural, and the use of the word 'appeared' implies that these are written accounts, rather than word of mouth accounts.

Wynn was in London at the time of Southey's correspondence, and so the authors have checked issues of *The Times* for the relevant period, but without success. Whilst it is possible that Southey may have been expecting Wynn to have seen either Bristol or Bath newspapers, this is considered unlikely. It was very common for newspaper articles to be reprinted in the 18th century, but the traffic was usually from London to the provinces rather than the other way around. Therefore the reason for Southey's presumption that Wynn might have been aware of the discovery remains unknown. Southey's reference to papers in the plural may have been referring to the additional, still untraced, newspaper accounts that Southey

himself had clearly seen although there is also a case for other, currently untraced, sources as well, which may have been available to Wynn in London.

In addition, Southey's letter to the *Monthly Magazine* states that 'many exaggerated accounts have appeared of the cavern lately discovered at Burrington Combe', and in view of this he now intends to give 'an authentic description'. However, the first newspaper report, the *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, (Anon 1797a), does not seem in any way exaggerated. It is short, concise and makes no mention of the number of skeletons found.

In Southey's letter to the *Monthly Magazine* he quotes four facts which he states were related in the newspapers. Firstly, that the number of skeletons was given as thirty, secondly, that they were 'perfect', thirdly, that they were 'lying north and south', and fourthly, that the bones were 'cemented to the rock'. Southey then goes on to contradict certain specific statements in these reports. He states that there were no perfect skeletons, nor was there 'any apparent regularity in the mode of laying them'. He is not specific on the matter of whether the bones were cemented to the rock but he does state that they were 'incrusted' with 'stalactydes' and 'crumble away' when attempts were made to remove them. He makes no mention of the number of skeletons, but neither does he specifically contradict the number given in the newspapers reports to which he refers, except by inference when coupled with the use of the word 'exaggerated'.

None of the details which Southey refutes in his letter appear in any of the extant accounts. In the reports that have been found the skeletons are referred to as 'lying promiscuously', which does not indicate any sort of regular order, nor do the available newspaper accounts mention them 'lying north and south'.

This therefore lends further weight to the argument that other newspaper reports must have existed which the authors have been unable to trace.

Can any conclusions be reached as to the authorship of the extant newspaper reports?

It is reasonable to assume that the three newspaper reports (Anon 1797a, b & c) were written by the same person. The first two (the *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser* and the *Bath Herald & Register*) are almost identical apart from the opening two words relating to the date, and the third one (the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette*) uses the same words as the first two but adds additional detail. The first piece of new information in that longer report concerns the presence of a cave formation, which appears to have been a stalactite and stalagmite which did not quite meet to form a column, or alternatively was a broken column that, when struck, emitted a musical noise. The third, longer report also adds that the skeletons were 'not placed in regular order' and then goes on to use the same phrase 'lying promiscuously', contained in the earlier reports. The possible meaning of this description will be discussed below.

Additional detail is also given in the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* of local people visiting the site and it is stated that some of the skeletal material had also started to be removed from the cave. As a result, 'a neighbouring gentleman' had fitted a door to the cave in order to preserve its contents.

To find additional detail given in the later of the three newspaper reports is not surprising as it appears to have been written approximately three weeks after the original discovery, and at least six days after the second of the newspaper reports to appear.

The new information in the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* comprises the first mention of the musical formation, subsequently referred to by Gibbes (1799 & 1800a, b & c), and also the only known mention of a gate being fitted very shortly after the discovery. No mention of this gate is made in later accounts of the cave, nor does Southey make reference to it. It is impossible to state for how long the gate remained in place. Skinner, writing in 1824

(quoted in Schulting 2005), stated that his information had been obtained from one of the original discoverers and makes reference to the rector of Burrington, Mr S(ydenham) T(east) Wylde, having had several cartloads of earth thrown over the bones in order to bury them. However, these actions proved ineffective as sheep were said to be continually entering the cavern and uncovering the bones. If a working gate had remained in place, this is unlikely to have been a problem, although it is of course possible that Mr Wylde took this action before the gate was erected.

Dr Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, who had his summer residence at Mendip Lodge, near Burrington Combe, mentions the cave in a notebook that was seen by Davies at some point prior to September 1921, and an extract was published in the first UBSS report on Aveline's Hole (Davies 1921):

As two young men were chasing a rabbit in Burrington Combe, the little animal took refuge in the crevice of a rock, the lads, not willing to give up the object of their pursuit, procured a pickaxe with which they attempted to enlarge the entrance of the retreat, when a considerable portion of the stone gave way and discovered to their astonishment a cavern of considerable extent. As a very great collection of human bones were found in different parts of the Cave, it became a subject of curiosity and was visited for many months by persons of every description.

In this extract, no mention is made of Whalley having visited the site himself although Knight (1915) evidently believed that he did. Knight does not quote directly from Whalley, but says that the notebook mentions the great numbers of visitors and the beautiful conical stalactite. There are not enough details in common between these extracts and the newspaper reports to prove that Whalley was the author and unfortunately his notebook is now lost (Shaw, 1972). An edited version of his journals and correspondence was published after his death (Wickham 1863), but unfortunately makes no reference to the discovery of Aveline's Hole.

What contemporary information is available regarding the positioning of the skeletons?

The *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser* states that the skeletons were 'lying promiscuously', exactly the same words are used in the *Bath Herald & Register*, and the longer report in the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* expands the description to state that the skeletons were 'not placed in regular order, but lying promiscuously'.

In view of this, it is necessary to consider what the correspondent, or correspondents, may have meant by the use of the word 'promiscuously'. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines the word promiscuous in the following ways: 1. Consisting of members or elements of different kinds massed together without order; of mixed or disorderly composition or character; also of various kinds mixed together. 2. That is without discrimination or method; confusedly mingled, indiscriminate (1605). 3. Casual, carelessly irregular (vulgar or colloquial usage 1837) and 4. (quasi-adverb) promiscuously (1671).

From these definitions it appears clear that the words used in the three newspaper accounts presented in this paper can be taken to mean that the skeletons were not lying in any sort of regular order.

Southey's letter to the Editor of the *Monthly Magazine* (Southey, 1797b) refers to reports that describe the bodies as 'perfect, and lying north and south'. However, as has been shown above, these reports remain untraced. Southey contradicts these accounts by stating that 'neither was there any perfect skeleton, or any apparent regularity in the mode of laying them.'

In addition, Southey specifically states that 'there are no bodies farther in than a body thrown from the aperture would have fallen;'. From this it appears that he believed the bodies were thrown into the cave and simply left to lie where they fell. In the absence of any other contemporary accounts that address the positioning of the skeletons, it seems reasonable to accept that Southey's account corroborates the extant newspaper accounts and to conclude that there was no regularity in the positioning of the bodies.

CONCLUSIONS

The fresh accounts that have been traced now cast some doubt on a date of discovery of Sunday 8th January 1797 and open up a wider range of possible dates. However, in view of the clear practice in newspapers at the time of effectively reprinting, almost unchanged, accounts from earlier publications, the first of the range of dates, that of Sunday 8th January may well still remain the most likely. In addition, Sunday seems to have been the most likely day for two young men to be pursuing sporting activities such as rabbiting, as the short daylight hours at that time of year would seem to preclude such an activity from taking place at either side of a working day, assuming, of course, that the two men in question were gainfully employed. Therefore, whilst a wider range of possible dates has now been opened up for debate, the original date still seems most likely to be correct.

It appears from Southey's letters that not all the contemporary reports of the opening of the cave and the discovery of its contents have been found. There is still no newspaper report available that gives the number of skeletons as thirty, there is no account describing the skeletons as perfect, nor is there any account that implies any regularity in their method of placement. There are no other known local newspapers from the relevant period that remain to be checked, with the exception of the untraced *Taunton Herald & Weekly Advertiser*, so the identity of the reports that Southey is specifically contradicting still remains a mystery.

However, it is clear that written reports making these claims did exist, as Southey specifically contradicts details from other accounts. It is also possible that these now-unknown accounts are the ones from which some later descriptions of the cave and its contents stem. It is possible that references in the newspaper articles which Southey saw to the skeletons being 'perfect' and 'lying north and south' may have been the reports on which Wansey (1805), Seyer (1821) and Rutter (1829) base their observations. Wansey refers to '50 perfect skeletons lying parallel to each other'. Rutter uses the same number but states that the bodies were 'placed regularly with their heads close under the north side of the rock, and their feet extending towards the centre'. The sources for the details recorded by Wansey, Seyer and Rutter are not known and the reports to which Southey is referring must remain candidates in this respect. Wansey erroneously gives the year of discovery as 1795, and as this is duplicated in Seyer and Rutter, it is likely that Wansey (1805) is the only source seen by them. This has been fully discussed by Boon & Donovan (1954).

The other main source for information on the original discovery are the unpublished journals of Reverend John Skinner for the years 1819 – 1824. The contents of Skinner's journals are dealt with in detail in Schulting (2005) and will not be repeated here, however, it worth noting that in his first journal entry Skinner (1819) notes that the skeletons were lying on the left hand side of the cave, about twenty feet from the entrance and that they had 'their heads placed against the rock'. In his later, more detailed entry (Skinner, 1824) he states that the skeletons were 'lying not side by side, but one after the other, their feet pointing towards the opening of the cavern:'. However it must be remembered that Skinner was writing some 22

years after the discovery, and although in his 1824 journal entry he states that his account was obtained directly from one of the first men to have entered the cave, these memories were by then a quarter of a century old, and it is of course possible that Skinner's source could have been one of the 'exaggerated accounts' which Southey specifically contradicts.

However, with the discovery of Southey's letters, a direct, eye-witness account is now available from someone who visited the cave within three weeks of its discovery. Southey was sufficiently interested in the reports of cave and its contents to make considerable efforts to visit at the earliest possible opportunity. He makes a point of telling his friend Wynn in his first letter that he can 'expect a true & particular account'. Following his visit, he takes the trouble to contradict what he regarded as inaccurate accounts, firstly by conveying this information to a wide audience through the medium of the *Monthly Magazine* and secondly by setting out his own observations in a letter to his friend and correspondent, Wynn. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Southey's statements, and the fact that he claims to be refuting exaggeration appears to lend credibility to his words.

Of particular interest and importance is Southey's observations on the positioning of the bodies. He appears to believe that the bodies were thrown into the cave, not placed there deliberately in any particular order. He also refutes an untraced report that appeared to indicate there was some regularity in the mode of placement, in that the bodies were said to be lying 'north and south'.

As well as Southey's own direct observations, his accounts are also of interest for what they do not mention. Firstly, he makes no reference to the gate, although the report that mentions this in the *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* is dated 27th January 1797, the day before Southey's visit, therefore either he simply did not mention it, or it had been removed extremely quickly by souvenir hunters.

Secondly, Rutter (1829) refers to the skeletons as being 'surrounded by black mould'. No mention is made of this detail by Southey. It is possible that this mould was a consequence of excrement left behind by the sheep that were frequenting the cave as well as earth thrown over the bones, at the direction of Mr Wylde in order to bury them. As Southey visited the cave no more than nineteen days after its discovery, almost certainly before the unknown local gentleman caused a gate to be fitted, it is highly unlikely that Wylde's intervention had yet taken place. The mostly likely scenario is that once the gate either fell into disrepair or was damaged or removed by visitors, sheep started to enter the cave, prompting Wylde to take action, presumably out of respect for the dead, believing that the skeletons should not lie unburied.

The main importance of Southey's letters lies in what he tells us about the placement of the bodies. From a combination of Southey's letters and the extant newspaper accounts it seems reasonable to conclude that the bodies were not placed in the cave in any sort of regular manner and indeed the idea that they were 'lying north and south' is specifically contradicted. By association, this casts doubt on all later reports that purport to give detail on how the bodies were believed to have been lying. For the same reason there appears to be no basis in any contemporary sources for later claims that the bodies were lying either parallel with each other, or with their heads to the north wall. This is clearly important in the context of any studies into Mesolithic burial practices as none of the extant contemporary accounts can be used to support any theory that the bodies may have been placed in the cave in any sort of regular order.

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APPENDIX ONE

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES CHECKED.

An * indicates positive results

**Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*: Thursdays 5/1/97 - 23/2/97.

**Bath Herald and Register* Saturdays: 7/1/97 - 25/2/97.

Bath Journal: Mondays 2/1/97 - 20/2/97.

Bonner & Middletons Bristol Journal: Thursdays 7/1/97 – 4/3/97.

**Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser* Mondays 2/1/97 - 1/3/97

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal : Saturdays 7/1/97 – 11/3/97

Gentleman's Magazine 1797: Saturdays 7/1/97 - 11/3/97.

Gloucester Journal: Mondays 5.1.97 - 28/2/97.

**Monthly Mirror* Jan/ Feb 1797.

**Monthly Magazine 1797*: Southey's letter only.

Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal ? Not published or not survived for Jan 1797.

The Bristol Gazette & Public Advertiser: Mondays 5/1/97 - 2/3/97.

**The Sporting Magazine* Jan - July 1797.

The Times 15/12/96 - 9/3/97.

The Western Flying Post; or, Sherbourne and Yeovil Mercury and General Advertiser, aka *Western Gazette*: Mondays 26/12/1796 – 20/2/1797, (6th Feb missing from Taunton Library Collection).

Not checked

Taunton Herald & Weekly Advertiser, thought to exist but no copies found in Bristol or Taunton (Penney 1995).

APPENDIX TWO
FACSIMILES OF THE MAIN SOURCES.

nature during the raining season.
Yesterday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Coombe, they observed it take shelter in a small crevice of the rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pickaxe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern, the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and embossed with whimsical concreted forms. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, lying promiscuously, almost converted into stone.—Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford, Somersetshire.

a. 16th (Monday) January 1797 *Bristol Mercury & Universal Advertiser*

Friday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Coombe, they observed it to take shelter in a small crevice of the rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pickaxe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern, the roof and sides of which are most curiously fretted and embossed with whimsical concreted forms. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, lying promiscuously, almost converted into stone.—Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford, Somersetshire,

b. 21st (Saturday) January 1797, *Bath Herald & Register*.

Sunday se'nnight as two young men were pursuing a rabbit in Burrington Coombe, they observed it take shelter in a small crevice of a rock. Desirous of obtaining the little animal, they with a pick-axe enlarged the aperture, and in a few minutes were surprised with the appearance of a subterraneous passage leading to a large and lofty cavern; the roof and the sides of which are most curiously fretted and imbossed with whimsical con- creted forms.—From the dome ascends a petrefaction, in the figure of an inverted cone; this is nearly met by another of similar shape, which arises from the floor immediately beneath, and emits, upon being struck, a very loud and musical sound. On the left side of the cavern are a number of human skeletons, (now almost converted into stone) not placed in regular order, but lying promiscuously. The country people, who in great numbers flocked to visit this wonderful cemetery, had begun their depredations; but a neighbouring gentleman has, with great liberality and propriety, caused a door to be fitted to the entrance, in order to preserve it per- fect as possible, as a treat for the Naturalist and Anti- quarian.—Burrington is 12 miles from Bristol, and the cavern about three parts of a mile from Langford.

c. 26th (Thursday) 1797, *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette*.

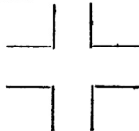
To the Editor of the *Monthly Magazine*.

SIR,

AS many exaggerated accounts have appeared of the cavern lately discovered at Burrington-Coombe, in Somersetshire, an authentic description may, perhaps, be acceptable to your readers.

It was related in the newspapers, that thirty skeletons were discovered, perfect, and lying north and south, the bones cemented to the rock: but neither was there any perfect skeleton, or any apparent regularity in the mode of laying them. The entrance to the cavern is by a steep descent: from the irregular manner in which the skulls lie, it appears, that the bodies were thrown down carelessly; and I am confirmed in this opinion, by observing, that though the cavern extends one hundred and thirty feet, there are no bones farther in than a body thrown from the aperture would have fallen; none of the smaller bones remain. The skulls are incruited with Stralhydes, and crumble away when an attempt is made to remove them.

A sepulchral vault was discovered, some few years back, near Nimble, in the neighbourhood, but it has been destroyed, and the stones used in a lime-kiln near! Of this I could get no other information. In the parish of Budome there is another, which I visited; it is shaped thus:



and

and extends about ten feet either way. Many bones were lying there, but as it is long since it was opened, I could learn nothing of the position in which they were found. The vault is very rudely constructed: it is on a level with the field, covered over with stones and rubbish, but so irregularly, as to present no appearance of a tunnel.

I shall be obliged to any of your readers who can inform me, at what period these modes of sepulture were common.

Bristol, Jan. 28.

B.

e. 28th (Saturday) 1797, letter from Southey to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine*, published in February 1797 (Southey 1797b).

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