

THE AVELINE BROTHERS AT AVELINE'S HOLE

by

A. BOYCOTT and L.J. WILSON

ABSTRACT

A letter from Henry Thomas Aveline containing the earliest known sketch survey of the cave is presented in full for the first time and records the activities at the site by him and his brother, William Talbot Aveline, after whom the cave was named. The letter also provides evidence that by 1843 no human remains appear to have been visible in the entrance passage.

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that Aveline's Hole was named after William Talbot Aveline by William Boyd Dawkins. (Anon, 1922; Witcombe, 1992, 2008), but what was not known was whether he had any actual connection to the cave beyond its name. W.T. Aveline was Boyd Dawkins' friend and mentor, and Boyd Dawkins bestowed his name on the cave for the first time in print in his article, *On the Caverns of Burrington Combe*, in the Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society (Boyd Dawkins, 1865).

During research into the early history and literature of Aveline's Hole (Boycott and Wilson, 2010, 2011), a summary of a letter written by Henry Thomas Aveline to Sir Henry de la Beche was found in a book detailing the De la Beche Archive (Sharpe and McCartney, 1998). The original letter is in the archive of the Department of Geology at the National Museum of Wales, accession number NMW84.20G.D42. A copy was subsequently obtained and is reproduced here with their permission. It records the visit of the Aveline brothers to the cave on 10 February 1843, gives details of what they found and contains the earliest known sketch survey of the whole cave. Although earlier drawings by Reverend John Skinner are known (Schulting *et al*, 2005; Boycott and Wilson, 2011) these only show the entrance to the cave and some points of detail within it.

TRANSCRIPTION

H.T.Aveline
Oatlands
Wrington
12 Feb. 1843

To: Sir H. De la Beche

Dear Sir Henry,

As you were kind enough to give me permission to correspond with you I shall now avail myself of that privilege to give you an account of our discovery of some bones at Burrington, as perhaps it may interest you.

My brother & myself having come to the conclusion that the Burrington cave was in all probability ossiferous, proceeded on Friday last to the search when our labours were rewarded by finding about a dozen bones.

Perhaps this sketch will give you an idea of the section of the cave & position of the bones. [sketch]

The descent is rather steep & stony until you come to (A) where there is a level floor of stalagmite for a few feet from which a narrow rocky passage (B) leads into the chamber (C) about ten yards long by four broad. The floor on this part is paved with stalagmite to the depth of about one foot beneath which is a stiff reddish clay (D) in which are the bones at about two or three feet below the surface.

The bones we found are 3 ribs about 13 inches long and 1 inch in circumference – two leg bones, one about 9 inches long and 3½ inches in circumference & the other much smaller – several fragments of bones, and what we suppose to be part of the head of an Ox or Deer. This is a sketch of it, front view [sketch]

We only searched a space of about 3 feet by 2 & went to the depth of 4 feet but did not search the bottom rock so that comparatively only a small portion has been examined.

The stalagmite floor appears never to have been broken through before so that we are the first discoverers of organic remains in this cave, and if the bones are worth preserving I should think we could get a good collection.

*I am, Dear Sir Henry, Yours faithfully,
H.T. Aveline*

DISCUSSION

Henry Thomas Aveline (b. Stroud, Gloucestershire, 14 October 1819, d. Epsom, Surrey, 4 January 1875), the author of the letter, was the older brother of William Talbot Aveline (b. Batheaston in 1822, d. Kennington, London, 12 May 1903)¹. Their familial relationship is evidenced by the grant of administration of Henry Thomas Aveline's will to William Talbot Aveline 'the Brother and one of the Next of Kin'.

At the date of the letter, Henry, 23 years old, was an articled clerk to a solicitor in Wrington, Somerset. His brother William, 20, was working as a geological surveyor, and eight years later in the 1851 census described himself as a 'Geologist on the Geological Survey of Great Britain'. Henry de la Beche, to whom the letter was written, was the first director of the Geological Survey of Great Britain and the founder of the Museum of Practical Geology in London, which later became the Geological Museum. In view of this, de la Beche was a natural choice to be the recipient of the observations made by the Aveline brothers. There is no record of any reply from de la Beche.

Although the cave is referred to in the letter as 'the Burrington Cave', it is clear from the sketch that Henry is referring to the cave later known as Aveline's Hole. The sketch bears a very close resemblance to the longitudinal section drawn by Boyd Dawkins (1865), reproduced in Boycott and Wilson (2011), although Boyd Dawkins shows the cave as descending at a steeper angle. The other main difference between the two is the absence from Henry's sketch of the shaft at the end dug by Boyd Dawkins in 1864 as that did not exist at the time of the brothers' visit.

¹ William Talbot Aveline is buried in West Norwood Cemetery, Norwood Road, West Norwood, London, SE27 9JU, and not, as stated in Witcombe, 1992 and 2008, with many other members of the family in Wrington churchyard. The grave is a pink granite tomb bearing the inscription 'In loving memory of William Talbot Aveline F.G.S. formerly of Wrington, Somerset' and can found at OSGB TQ 32287 72202.

It is interesting to note that although Henry lived in Wrington, no more than five kilometres from Burrington Combe, he does not appear to be aware of the fact that a large quantity of human skeletal material had originally been found there in 1797. It is clear from the letter that the Aveline brothers believed themselves to be the 'first discoverers of organic remains in the cave.' As the brothers appeared to have dug there in the hope of finding bones, it seems reasonable to conclude that by the time of their activities in 1843, no trace of any human bones remained easily visible in the entrance passage, whereas only 24 years earlier, on Skinner's first visit to the cave in 1819, he was shown 'several pieces imbedded in the stalactite' and also 'noticed part of the vertebra and hip entirely surrounded with the petrefaction; also a jaw bone, part of a finger bone &c, &c.' (Skinner, 1819)

The apparent absence of human material by 1843 bears out Skinner's no doubt unintentionally ironic observation in 1820 after the removal of 'some specimens' by his friend, Mr Cranch, that 'as the place has been much visited of late, and every visitor taken away with him a piece of the incrustation it will be soon demolished' (Skinner, 1820). With that in mind, it is clear that by the time of Skinner's third recorded visit in 1824, the stalactite-encrusted bones were becoming harder to procure as it took 'a quarter of an hour' digging with a pick axe for his guide to bring out 'the greater part of a cranium entirely embedded in the stalactite' (Skinner, 1824). Unless the Aveline brothers were monumentally unobservant, which does not appear to have been the case, it seems that Skinner's prediction had come true after only 23 years. William's abilities as an observer are evidenced by J.S. Flett's book *The First Hundred Years of the Geological Survey of Great Britain* (Flett, 1937) in which William was described as 'an enthusiastic worker and not only diligent but extremely accurate, and a most competent observer.'

If the brothers had been aware of the history of the cave, or if any evidence of bone had remained in the entrance passage, it is unlikely that they would have confined their digging activities to the final chamber. They dug there to a depth of '4 feet' in 'a space of about 3 feet by 2' and only found a small quantity of animal bone. The only other discoveries in that area were bones and teeth of wolf, sheep, pig and water vole by Boyd Dawkins 22 years later. The same effort much closer to the mouth of the cave would almost certainly have unearthed human material, as evidenced by the 1914 investigations by members of the Bristol Speleological Research Society (Davies, 1921).

In the letter, Henry Aveline refers to the chamber at the end of the cave (marked C on his sketch) as being paved with stalagmite to 'a depth of about one foot', through which they presumably had to dig to reach the 'stiff reddish clay' in which they found the animal bones. In Boyd Dawkins' account of his work in the cave, he mentions a crust of stalagmite 'in places three inches thick' that had been broken through either by Beard, who Boyd Dawkins believed had dug there, although there is no actual evidence for this belief (Boycott and Wilson, 2011), or 'a poor man of the neighbourhood, impelled by a dream to search for gold.' It is possible that what gave rise to Boyd Dawkins' mention of the breaking of the stalagmite crust was in fact the activities of the Aveline brothers 22 years earlier. It is unclear from Boyd Dawkins' description whether the broken stalagmite crust to which he refers was at the point marked A or B on his vertical section of the cave but the possibility that evidence of the brothers' activities was still visible when he visited the cave cannot be discounted.

It is curious that whilst William Talbot Aveline was well enough known to Boyd Dawkins to be described as his friend and mentor, his digging activities at the site do not appear to have been known to Boyd Dawkins, who makes no mention of this in his record of his own activities in the cave.

CONCLUSION

By the time of the Aveline brothers' visit in 1843, the cave had been open for a period of 47 years. Immediately after the discovery, a large number of skeletons were readily apparent. Their presence and state of preservation is recorded in various contemporary accounts (Boycott and Wilson, 2010) and it is clear that at the time of the original discovery there were a great many bones lying on the surface.

The discovery of the cave and its contents was widely known through the medium of newspaper and magazine reports and it appears to have been the subject of visits by curious individuals and souvenir hunters for many years, large numbers of whom took away a memento of their visit. Twenty-two years after the discovery, when asking if any bones remained, Skinner's guide showed him numerous pieces still embedded in stalagmite. The following year, Skinner's companion, Mr Cranch was able to satisfy his desire for a specimen from the cave without the help of a guide and, apparently, without having to resort to digging, but then a mere four years later in 1824, to obtain a 'specimen of incrustation', it was necessary for the guide to resort to digging with a pickaxe to obtain one.

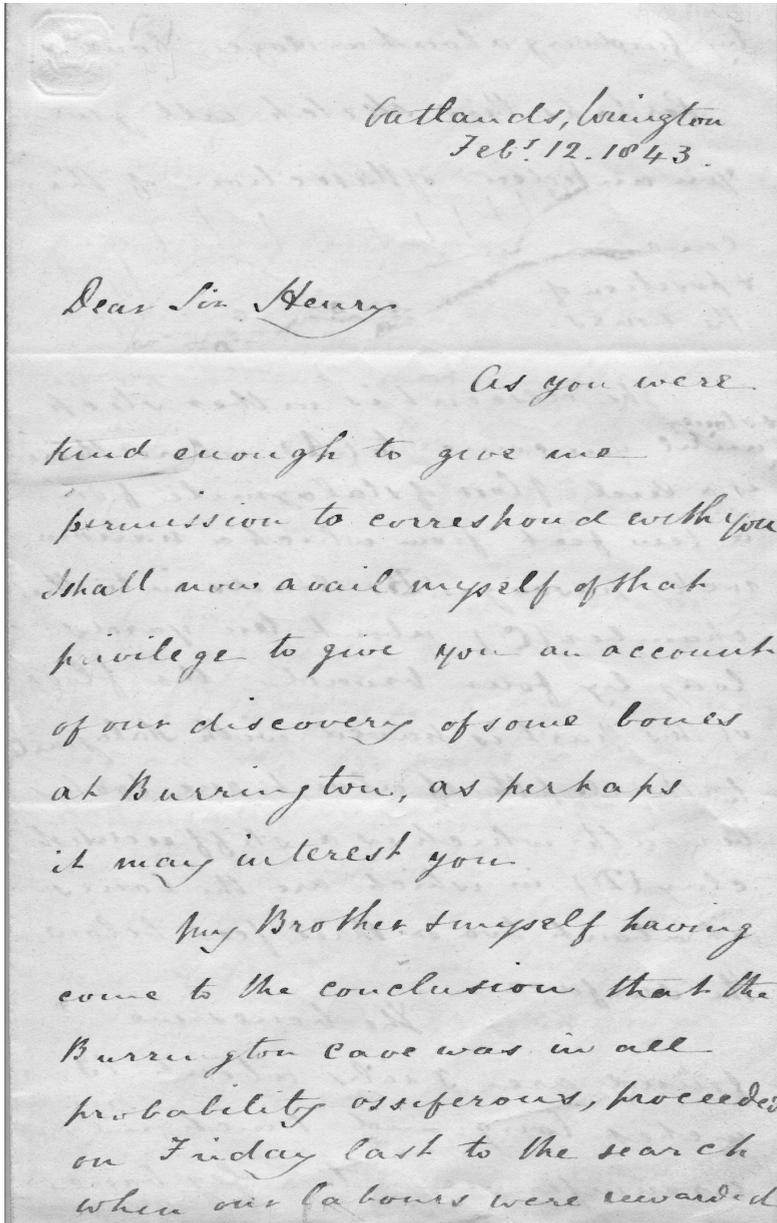
During the same visit in 1824, the boys that had accompanied Skinner and Cranch occupied themselves by collecting animal bones from inside the cave, but there is no mention of them discovering any human bones in the process, so it is reasonable to presume that only 27 years after the discovery it had become considerably harder for a visitor to obtain a souvenir. A further 19 years later, all trace of human remains on the surface appears to have gone. The Aveline brothers clearly saw nothing in the first part of the cave to excite their interest and so their digging activities were confined to the rear of the cave. It is probably fortunate for later investigators that they did not see anything to draw their attention to the entrance passage as if their activities had been successful, it is likely that even more material would have been removed from the cave, leaving little or nothing for later generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Richard Rossington for obtaining a copy of the letter for us and Tom Sharpe, Curator, Palaeontology and Archives, Department of Geology, National Museum of Wales for permission to reproduce it here.

APPENDIX
FACSIMILE OF THE LETTER FROM H.T. AVELINE TO H. De la BECHE

This letter is reproduced by kind permission of the Department of Geology, National Museum of Wales.



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Dear Sir Henry.

Yours faithfully

H. J. Boyle

Sir Henry De la Beche

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