

REVIEW

The story of Banwell Caves by John Chapman. 2011. Banwell Caves Heritage Group, The Caves, Banwell, Som. BS29 6NA. Softback 44 pages. Price £5. No ISBN. Available from sales@tcpc.co.uk

This is an attractive A5 size booklet which offers an introduction to the history of discovery of caves at Banwell. The Stalactite Cave, entered by miners in 1757 and then forgotten, was reopened in 1824, and the Bone Cave was discovered soon afterwards. It so happened that the site of the caves belonged to the Bishops of Bath and Wells, and also that in 1824 a new Bishop, George Henry Law, succeeded to the diocese. He was 63 or 64 and had been for some years Bishop of Chester, which diocese then included the developing industrial areas of Liverpool and Manchester, so that promotion to rural Bath and Wells may have been seen as a less demanding post. The rediscovery of the caves had been the initiative of the Rector of Banwell, but Bishop Law rapidly took an interest. He repurchased the lease of the property from the tenant with a view to preserving the caves for posterity. He then developed the estate in the picturesque fashion of the time, lived at Banwell latterly and died there in 1845.

Bishop Law was a fellow of the Royal Society and of the Society of Antiquaries, a progressive in social affairs and the welfare of the poor. He encouraged William Beard, a local farmer, who took an interest in the Bone Cave, and became curator and guide at the caves.

The most astonishing part of the discovery was the seemingly endless profusion of animal bones in the Bone Cave. Although many were displayed in an 'Osteoicon' specially built for the purpose, and many more went to private collections, there was still such a surplus that bone stacks were built around the walls of the Bone Cave. According to the present book, there is still unexcavated deposit beneath the floor. Balch, in his *Mendip, its swallet caves and rock shelters* (1937), listed no less than 25 species of mammals from the cave. His list includes large carnivores, cave lion and hyaena, and large pachyderms, mammoth and woolly rhinoceros, which later research has failed to confirm. Beard collected bones from other Mendip caves which led to confusion, whether deliberate or otherwise. Currant and Jacobi (2001) listed a mere nine species from the site and made it the type site for their Banwell assemblage-zone in the Late Pleistocene.

The Banwell Caves Heritage Group had previously published an A4 size booklet *A short history of Banwell Caves* (2007), by John Chapman, with line drawings by J M Haynes. This text is included almost unchanged in the present work. The line drawings, which are almost all of the 'picturesque' features of the estate, are also included. The chief difference is the addition of many colour photographs of the caves. A plan of the caves has been added to the vertical section included in *A short history*. There are also two 'new' portraits of William Beard, a photograph from 1854, previously, I believe, unpublished, and a lithograph of 1841. Both show him as an older man than the lithograph in Rutter's (1829) book.

The book does not discuss the mammalian fauna, or the question of how it got into the cave.

REFERENCES

CURRENT, A. and Jacobi, R. 2001. A formal mammalian biostratigraphy for the Late Pleistocene of Britain. *Quaternary Science Reviews*. **20**. 1707-1716.

RUTTER, J. 1829. *Delineations of the north western division of the County of Somerset, and of its antediluvian bone caverns, with a geological sketch of the district.* Shaftesbury.
John Rutter.

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