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AN ACCOUNT AND SURVEY OF GREAT OONE'S HOLE, CHEDDAR GORGE, SOMERSET

by

G.J. MULLAN and A.A.D. MOODY

ABSTRACT

The history and archaeology of Great Oone's Hole, in Cheddar Gorge are described, and a new survey is presented. The results of a previously unpublished investigation carried out in 1976-7 are discussed. It is concluded that the deposits have been too badly disturbed previously to merit further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

Great Oone's Hole is situated high on the southern side of Cheddar Gorge, between Gough's Cave and Cooper's Hole. It is one of the few Mendip caves that can be described as having been 'always open' but despite that it seems to have a relatively obscure history and to be rather less well known than some of its neighbours.

This account was inspired by two things; the re-survey of the cave as part of the project being carried out to build a comprehensive 3D model of all the caves in the Cheddar catchment and the discovery in the Society's Library of a log book detailing a trial excavation in the entrance area of the cave carried out in 1976-7 but never published.

OONES, GREAT AND OTHERWISE

The origin of the cave's name is not known for certain. Various writers have linked it to the Anglo-Saxon name for the Great Horned Owl (Barrington and Stanton, 1977) or the Anglo-Saxon for 'one' (Balch, 1935) The former seems unlikely, as the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) word for owl is either *úle* or *úf* (see http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/) and there seems to be nothing to link the site with owls; Barn Owls will nest on rock ledges and in caves, but there seems to be no direct evidence of this having happened at this site. The latter interpretation is more plausible as 'one' is *oon* in Middle English, the Old English being *ān*, meaning 'one' 'sole' or 'alone' and would give something like *the Great One's Cave*. There is, however, no conclusive evidence to justify a Middle English or Old English origin for the name of the cave.

Jim Hanwell, who was brought up in Draycott, near Cheddar, recalls *oone* being used for 'owl' by his grandfather, Reginald Davis who worked in the quarries at Cheddar and by other locals, including Roland Pavey, Victor Painter (see below) and Painter's son, Colin; the word being pronounced as if mimicking their hoots phonetically. (J.D. Hanwell, *pers. comm.)*. If this is so, then this dialect usage seems to have been very localised as it does not seem to be recorded in standard works on Somerset speech. Elworthy (1886) gives *oon* the meaning of 'one' in 19th century dialect. He notes that it is "most usual in Dorset and E. Somerset, but also heard commonly in the vale of West Som. about Bishop's Lydeard." Jennings (1825) makes no mention of the word, at all.

A further unlikely possibility is given by Witcombe (2008) who postulated that the name may be a corruption of *Great Wounte's Hole* where *wounte* is an archaic dialect term for 'mole'. This is partially corroborated by Jennings (*op. cit.)* who gives the spelling as *wont* but there seems to be no direct justification for this reading in this case.

HISTORY

The cave has been open for a considerable amount of time; it has in all likelihood always been accessible. This is attested by the discovery of an apopotreic mark in the form of conjoined 'V's by C.J. Binding (Binding and Wilson, 2010, Figure 4). This probably dates to the late Medieval or Early Modern period. The earliest known exploration is indicated by an inscription which has been found just before a fallen slab on the right, 20 m from entrance. It reads: *H Robinson, F Robinson, I Cripps, 1777*. However, nothing is known for certain about the cave's history until the 1920s[1]. Shaw (1966) states that the cave entrance may have been illustrated by the Rev. Skinner in 1816, but from the description given it seems unlikely to have been this cave. Irwin (1986, Plate 1.) reproduced Skinner's coloured sketch and states that it shows the entrance to Gough's Old Cave. Great Oone's is not described by Balch in his earliest comprehensive account of Mendip caves (Balch, 1926) although there is a possibility that he and Baker do mention it in their earlier work, *The Netherworld of Mendip* (Baker and Balch, 1907) but under the name 'Long Hole'. Long Hole itself, this cave's nearest neighbour, they referred to by its alternative name of the Roman Cave. The earliest reference that has been uncovered thus far to the cave by its current name is in a paper in these *Proceedings* by J.A. Davies in 1926. This account is intriguing for two reasons: firstly, he uses the name, Great Oones [sic] Hole, in a manner which implies that it is reasonably well known[2] and, secondly, he describes the cave as having been 'ransacked' by Mr Montagu Porch, in about 1902.

Porch is an interesting character being, amongst other things, the third husband of Jenny Churchill and thus Winston Churchill's stepfather, despite being three years his junior, but little seems to be known of his interest in prehistory save for his donation of collections to Weston-super-Mare Museum, to the British Museum (Garrod, 1926, p102) and possibly also to the Pitt Rivers museum (http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/collector_3033.html) and for the fact that he accompanied Flinders Petrie on an archaeological expedition to the Sinai desert in 1903-4 (Allen, 2011). Of his skills as an excavator nothing is known. He spent most of the 1920s and 30s abroad, in Africa and then in Italy, but returned to his birthplace of Glastonbury in 1938, remaining there until his death in 1964.

Balch, writing some ten years later than Davies, makes no direct mention of Porch, but does say that the cave was unsystematically dug by "the village boys" many years previously and still showed signs of this activity. He quotes the then head guide at Gough's Cave, Victor Painter as stating that the cave yielded a decorated carved bone object, decorated Early Iron Age pottery and, from the lower levels, Lion, Tiger and Hyaena bones. Balch considered that the presence of Tiger was dubious. There was no mention of Romano-British pottery or Roman coins (Balch, 1935a).

It is now virtually impossible to be certain whether any flint was actually collected by Porch from Great Oone's Hole itself. Davies (1926) implies that specimens may have come

[1] See below for details of other inscriptions found in the cave.

[2] A report of a church outing in the Weston Mercury for Saturday July 18th 1891 describes a walk, at Cheddar which reached "the summit of Great Hoons ..." (Anon, 1891). This is the earliest know reference to any variant of the name in this area. It clearly does not relate specifically to the cave, however.

from Flint Jack's Cave, but in contradiction, Oakley (1958) quotes part of a letter, dated 28th November 1950, from Balch to F.S. Wallis, then Director of the City Museum, Bristol which records Victor Painter as stating that 50 years before, flint artefacts from Great Oone's Hole were passed off as being from Flint Jack's Cave.

A further, and rather peculiar, piece of archaeology was described by Balch a few years later, when he described the discovery of fake Palaeolithic rock art in this cave. He notes that they "photographed and destroyed them, knowing them to be false" (Balch, 1941, p 50) but the work was still visible enough to be photographed in 2003 (Figure 1). According to Victor Painter, they were probably made between 1925 and 1935 (Tratman, 1946).

Whatever the effect that "the village boys" and Mr Porch may have had on the archaeology of the cave, it also seems to have been the case that it was stripped of a great many calcite formations, probably in the 19th century.

Figure 1. *Fake Palaeolithic cave paintings, reputedly destroyed in 1935, pictured in 2003.* **Photo: G. Mullan.**

In 1940, The cave was taken over by the armed forces, who equipped it as secret hideout for a Home Guard auxiliary unit, intended to be a sabotage team in the event of a German invasion. This work included the building of a wall across the entrance and the installation of a gate. Inside the cave they installed bunks and a water collection tank (Brown, 1999). Stanton (1944) describes it being fitted out "as an air raid shelter" in June 1944, but notes that by 1948, the fittings had been removed (Stanton, 1948). The remains of the entrance wall are

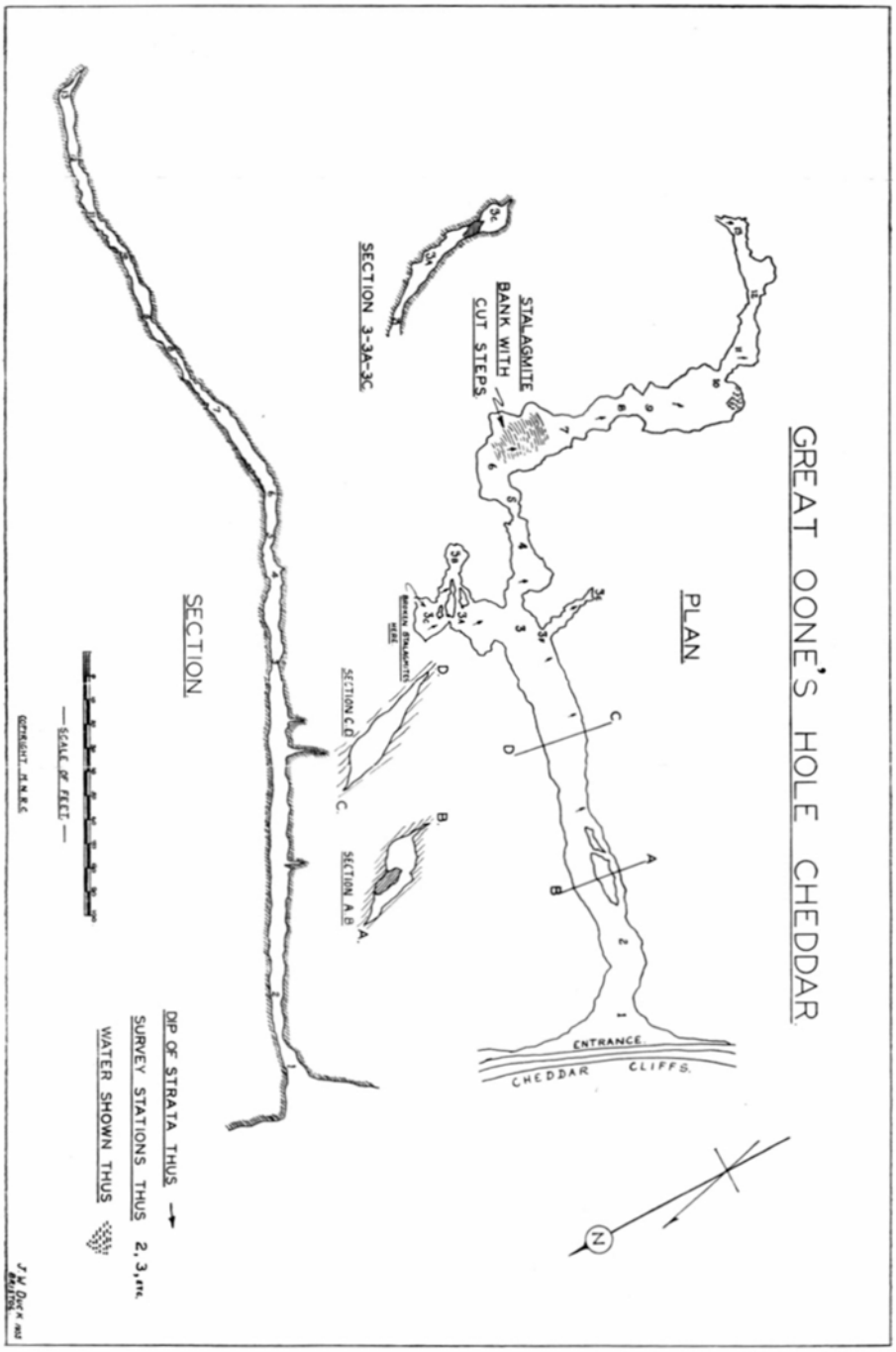

Figure 2. *1935 survey of Great Oone's Hole, by J.W. Duck.*

still there today. In 1956, the cave was again gated and locked by the landowners, the Longleat Estate, but this lock was reportedly soon removed (Frost, 1957) and the gate was completely removed at a later date.

In the early 1980s stalagmite samples were taken for purposes of radiometric dating. This material was reanalysed using modern methods in 2013 (see below).

THE 1976-7 EXCAVATIONS

According to the log books preserved in the Society's Library, which seem to be the only extant record of this work, the object of the dig was "to ascertain if the 'plunderers' who are reported to have dug here at the end of the 19th century did, in fact, destroy the site from the archaeological point of view, or if there is still a stratified sequence left and to recover any information which may still be found."

Work began with the production of a BCRA Grade 6c survey of the first 15 m of the cave by E.K. Tratman, Juliet Rogers, D.J. Irwin. R. Harrison and C.J. Hawkes in January 1976. However, excavation did not commence until June 12th that year. Work took place over five weekends during 1976 and 1977, with the final working visit being on the 3rd July 1977. The core team comprised Tratman, Mrs Rogers, Harrison, and Hawkes, supplemented at times by Mrs Elizabeth Hawkes, their two sons, Jeremy and Nick, and D. Wassell.

As no drawings of the excavations seem to have survived, it is difficult to easily analyse the results as recorded in the log. However, they do seem to have recorded a rough stratigraphy, though it seemed to intersect disturbed areas interpreted as being caused in part by the footings for the wall across the cave mouth and in part by a trench dug possibly by Mr Porch.

The stratigraphy can be partially reconstructed. The top layer was described in the log book thus: "Red limestone breakdown earth with many angular stones up to 150 mm square. Into the top of the layer a lot of glass, remains from recent fires, sheep bones, iron nails, bolts, clay pipe stems and pieces of 18/19th C. internally green glazed ware had been trodden in. This gradually died out and before the bottom of this layer (at 370 approx) the root system of the present plant cover had died out. Apart from the modern remains and the sheep bones no other material was found and there was no sign of disturbance except in the SE corner grading deeper than 200. In the SE corner however where the present surface dips down toward the cave entrance gate there was a little more disturbance and perhaps there had been a trench dug into the cave." [Depths refer to an arbitrary zero datum point established close by.]

The second layer was also described in some detail: "Yellow silty layer with many angular stones (reminiscent of the Pleistocene layers in other Mendip caves- EKT). No artefacts or skeletal material found. The layer went down gradually and erratically into a layer of white tufaceious material between the stones. The change was over several centimetres and associated with a more open texture in the deposit as there was no salt between the stones but just a white patchy coating on the stones. The layer dips down into the cave – south. Middle to south the layer was looser and more open as if there had been a ground slip ? Down to the gorge at some time in the distant past. To the north end the layer was solider and a little damper – not so sheltered going down to a clay-marl layer over a large rock."

The third layer was described in less detail but appears to have been an archaeologically sterile marl.

The majority of the finds appear to have come from the second layer. The log lists skeletal remains "some of which appeared modern and others rather older" of sheep/goat,

rabbit, deer, horse, various birds, various rodents, insectivores, and possibly amphibians. At least one fragment of a flint blade, a piece of glass, some caches of nuts of different vintages and charcoal apparently from at least one hearth are also mentioned.

Thus although it does seem that there may have been some Pleistocene fauna present, confirmed by a personal communication from Hawkes to Roger Jacobi (Jacobi, 2004) it also seems that the deposit has, indeed, been seriously disturbed and does not therefore justify any further excavation. It is not known where the finds now are. Despite the site being given a UBSS catalogue number (M44) the material is not in the Society's museum and no catalogue was written. Neither is it listed in the Gough's Cave Museum catalogue, which lists but two items from this site, a crudely made pottery lamp and a sherd from a decorated pot.

It seems clear that work ceased owing to the seriously disturbed nature of the deposit. The final visit, on 24th July 1977, by Tratman, Irwin and Hawkes was spent cleaning a better way into the main cave to "allow easier access to the cave for dumping inside - if a suitable site can be found. That no final report was produced, even a brief one, can probably be attributed to

Figure 3. *Great Oone's main passage*.
Photo: A.P. Glanvill.

Tratman's subsequent illness and his death in August 1978. A final visit was made on the 17th June 1979 by a team including Hawkes and Harrison who cleared out the accumulated debris of the previous two years and started to cut down through what appeared to be lenses of 'tip soil'. This work recovered two coins thought to be of Roman date. Sketches of these can be found on

a sheet of paper inside one of the log books, but the current whereabouts of the specimens themselves is unknown.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CAVE

The entrance to the cave is a 5 m wide arch, located high up the left-hand bank of Cheddar Gorge. In the past, a wall was constructed across the back of the arch allowing the cave to be locked. The cave contains numerous inscriptions throughout its length and in this description, the numbers in square brackets refer to entries in the detailed list of inscriptions given below. After passing the remnants of the old gate, access is gained to a wide roomy passage with a rubbish-strewn floor [1]. About 7 m from the gate there is a line of three large boulders [2]. Immediately beyond the third one, fake Palaeolithic cave paintings can be found on the sloping, now yellow algae covered, right-hand wall. (Figure 1).

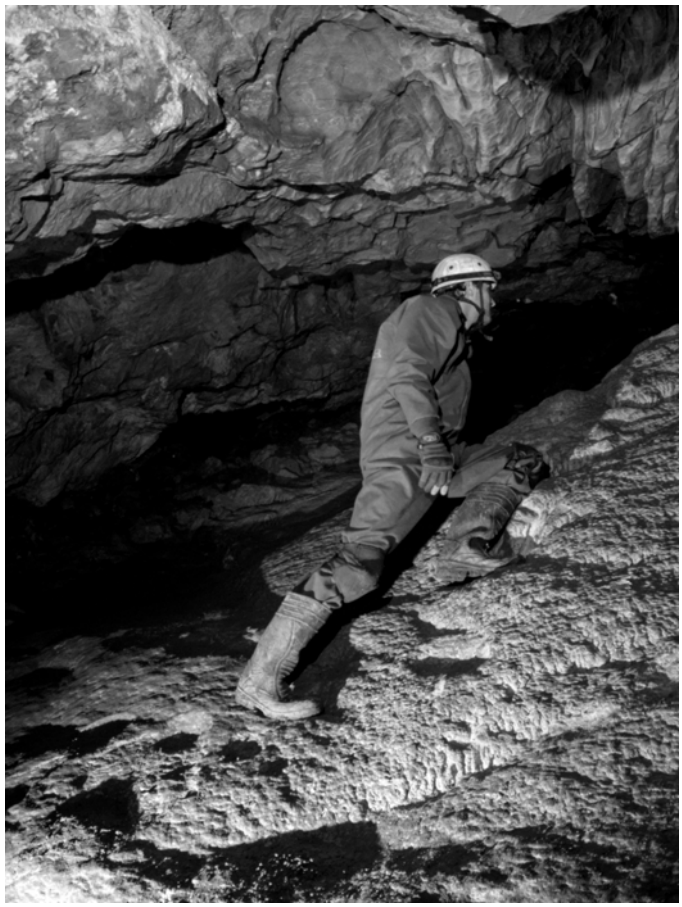

Figure 4. *The Slip, with steps cut in the calcite bank.*
Photo: A.P. Glanvill.

Ahead, the passage narrows slightly [3, 4] and the passage beyond [5] slopes gently uphill to a six-way junction, approximately 50 m from the entrance. The passage widens at this point and the two ways on ahead unite after a few metres to form the route further into the cave. Two passages lead off to the right; the first is a loose bouldery crawl that descends steeply to a choke after 7 m, and the other passage is a narrow blind rift [6]. The final option at the six-way junction slopes up left to a level platform [7]. Four passages lead off from this point, and of the two routes to the right, the lower one has a tight connection to the higher continuation of the main route, while the other provides the return for a short round trip. This can be achieved by ascending either of the two parallel passages that rise steeply above the platform. These two climbs unite in a horizontal passage that immediately divides. The left-hand branch slopes up to

a small damaged grotto [8]. Here, evidence of chisel marks can be found and at some stage an attempt seems to have been made to erase some inscriptions and to remove the calcite block into which they were carved. In the grotto, a small blind annex can be entered by squeezing up the back wall and a hole over to the right in the floor provides a tight connection with the other branch at the last junction. This option starts horizontally, but after a couple of metres the floor drops out as the passage changes to a 4 m deep rift. A direct descent can be made or, by traversing along the rift, it is possible to step down to a bouldery floor. At this point a scalloped mud-choked tube leads off to the left and in the opposite wall a small descending passage chokes after 4 m.

The main route doubles back along the base of the rift and after a few metres a choice of either a lower or upper option both provide a link to the platform area mentioned earlier. One enters at floor level and the other comes in halfway up the right-hand climb.

Continuing down cave from the six-way junction, the easiest route is the lower passage. The higher option [9] drops into the lower route via a slippery calcite slope. Scratched and pencil inscriptions can be found in the scalloped ceiling just beyond where the two passages unite. Ahead the passage widens at an area of breakdown, notable for the boulders covered in a vivid red ochre based mud and for a fine boulder arch. The safest option is to pass through the right-hand side of the arch and beyond the breakdown the passage bends right and descends steeply at a feature known as The Slip.

The Slip begins at an impressive flowstone bank, 10 m high and up to 6 m wide. In places shallow steps have been cut into the calcite. On the descent, two blind steeply ascending tubes can be entered by moving across to the left. A parallel option on the right-hand side of the stalagmite bank provides an alternative bouldery route back to the breakdown area, entering near the boulder arch.

At the base of the bank there are several features of interest. A 5 m high double aven rises above the right-hand side of the stalagmite bank, one option is blind and the other closes up at the top in a too-tight passage. In the roof ahead is the remnant of a large vandalised geode where, unfortunately, only a few dog-tooth crystals remain [10]. Below the stalagmite bank The Slip continues descending steeply but the passage narrows, to 2 m wide, and the roof lowers forcing a crawl. After a few metres the passage widens in a breakdown area, with boulder slabs, before breaking out into a sizeable bedding chamber 12 m long and up to 8 m wide [11, 12]. The laminated flowstone from where the U/Th dated stalagmite sample (see below) was taken is located in the top right-hand corner of the chamber. A nearby ledge, easily identifiable by the black smoke mark on the wall has been used to form a candle niche. [13] Formations in the chamber include a flowstone bank on the right and at the lowest point dried up pools contain some superb calcite snowflake type rafts. A hole down to the left of the pools [14] gives access to a descending chamber with a calcite flow along the floor. The chamber narrows to a constriction and beyond this a short crawl leads to a junction. The sizeable branch to the left closes down after 7 m. The right branch, a phreatic passage, ends in a stalagmite choked grotto and a dig below a false floor.

LIST OF RECORDED INSCRIPTIONS

1. The first inscriptions, which include *H Cooper, F Trevana, F (*or *E) Harris, Cheddar* are scratched on the sloping right-hand roof where the passage becomes standing height, about 7 m from the gate and just before the first of the line of three large boulders.

2. Just beyond these, inscriptions have been written, in what appears to be red wax on the ceiling above the first boulder with the names *H Robinson, F Robinson, I Cripps 1777,* see above, and on the opposite wall: *Luke D.…. 177?*. On this wall there is also an inscription in pencil: *J Hill… 1902.*

3. After 6 m there is an illegible inscription scratched on the right wall, directly opposite a section of damaged flowstone at head height.

4. Other inscriptions are found in a blind chimney *Mu.…. Scarborough York* scratched on a wall.

5. In the passage beyond the narrow point are inscriptions including *G Horn 1931* written in pencil.

6. The blind narrow rift has some fine inscriptions scratched on the left wall near the end, 1.5 m above the boulder floor: *1912 H Pavey, James Thomas* and also the adjacent initials *JS CG RS KG HG 1937*.

7. At the level platform several indecipherable inscriptions have been scratched on the walls and roof.

8. In the small damaged grotto there are many inscriptions including a set that have been chiselled on the back flowstone wall: *13/8 1902 E Wayland, F Cooper*.

Figure 5. *Pencilled inscription (see item 13).*
Photo: A.A.D. Moody.

9. The higher route has several, possibly chalk, inscriptions including a *W* described as being in a very old style. As noted above, about ten years ago, a conjoined 'V' a type of sign used as a ritual protective mark was also described, but has not been located since. This was described as being close to the entrance and was drawn in "what appeared to be charcoal on soft moonmilk covering the rock (Binding and Wilson, *op. cit.*).

10. To the left of the geode, a 4m high roof pocket has a pencil inscription on one wall: *J. Mathison 5. Aug 1930*.

11. On entering the chamber, there is flowstone covered with pencil inscriptions on the overhanging roof: *R A Coop* written three times – two of which are coated in calcite.

12. From point [11] by moving across to the right, looking down the chamber, another inscription can be seen which has been scratched in the overhanging roof: *A Pavey 1900*.

13. Continuing down the chamber and about 5 m from the entry point three calcite coated pencil inscriptions are found high on the right-hand wall: *R A Coop 1899, H Rogers* twice *1919*. A nearby set of inscriptions bend around a corner to follow the line of the wall: *N. Morton L Burnell …..… Aug 10th 1906* (Figure 5).

Figure 6. *Scratched inscription (see item 6).*
Photo: A.A.D. Moody

14. Above the hole down, further inscriptions have been engraved including in a box: *1932 AH RS*.

15. The phreatic passage has numerous inscriptions dating as far back as the 1930s.

RADIOMETRIC DATING

The sample of calcite collected in the 1980s has been reanalysed, as noted above, by a team led by Don McFarlane and Joyce Lundberg. Dr Lundberg writes: "Great Oone's Hole is a palaeo-resurgence cave for Cheddar River that is currently accessible from Gough's Cave. As such, ages on Great Oone's flowstones potentially provide minimum ages for stream

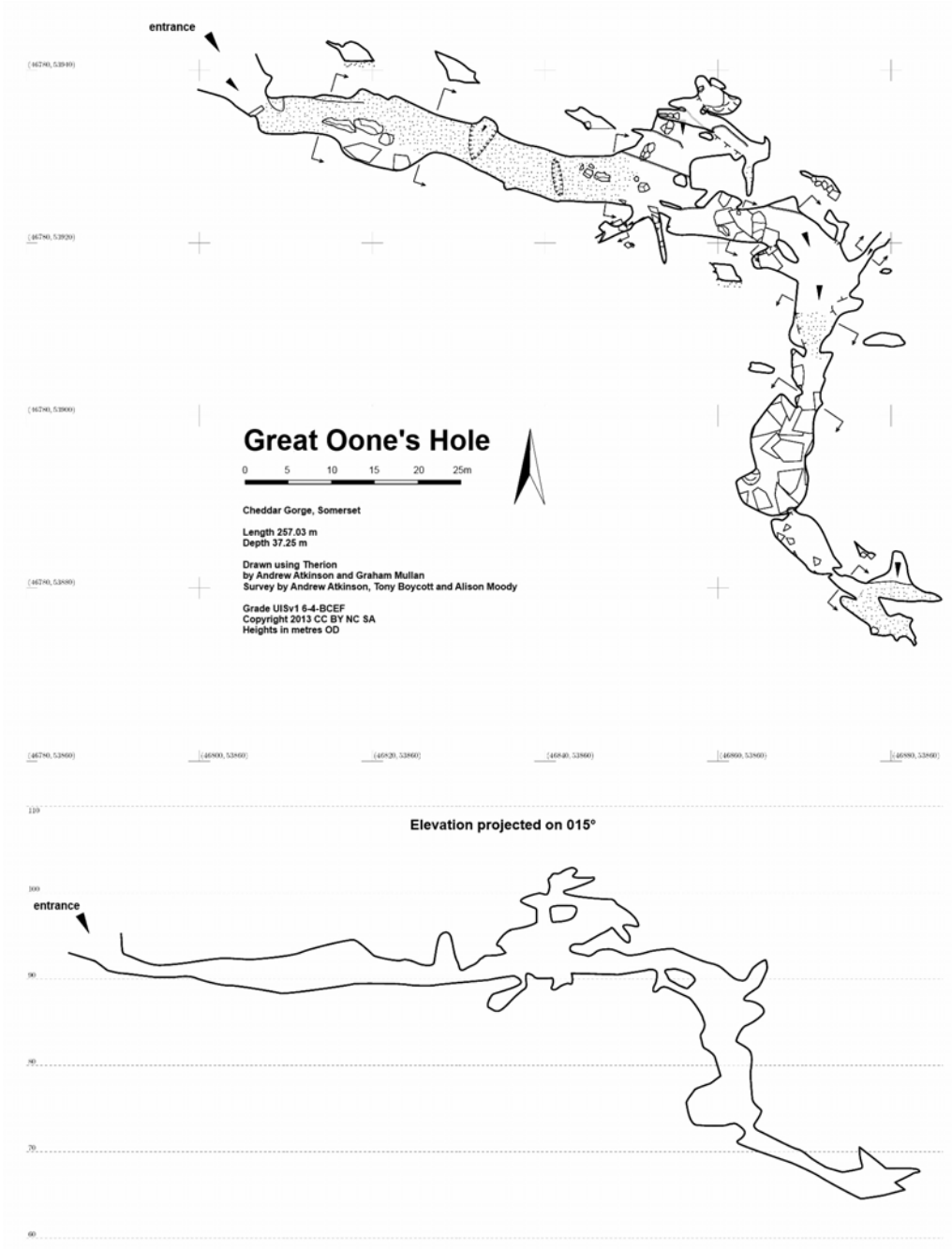

Figure 7. *Plan and projected elevation survey of Great Oone's Hole.*

abandonment and can be used to refine estimates of Gorge downcutting rate, work pioneered by Andy Farrant. A re-examination of a flowstone fragment from the lower part of Great Oone's hole, using TIMS U-Th dating, has yielded a marine isotope stage 9 age (~280,000 - 330,000 years). In conjunction with better elevation data provided by the UBSS re-survey of Great Oone's, we are now developing a more formal project to re-date critical deposits in the Gorge. The original analysis of this material was inconclusive and was thus never published."

NOTES ON THE SURVEY

Great Oones Hole has been mapped in entirety twice before. The first survey was carried out by J.W. Duck and published in 1935 (Balch, 1935b). It is reproduced here as Figure 2. The second drawing was made by W.I. Stanton and published by him both as part of his Gough's Cave drawing (Stanton, 1952) and later as part of his more comprehensive survey of all the then known caves of Cheddar Gorge (Stanton, 1965). The data for the BCRA Grade 6c survey of the first 15 m of the cave mentioned above is still extant in the Society's Library, in one of the log books, but this never appears to have been drawn up.

The present survey (Figure 7) was carried out on the 31st May 2013, by Andrew Atkinson, Alison Moody and Tony Boycott using a Distox and PDA combination (Mullan and Atkinson, 2013). Total length is 257.03 m and vertical range 37.25 m. There are four closed loops, with relative errors of 0.61%, 0.52%, 0.40% and 0.28%. The survey is considered to be to grade UISv1 6-4-BCEF. (See http://www.uisic.uis-speleo.org/UISmappingGrades.pdf.) The entrance location was checked using a hand-held Garmin Oregon 450 GPS with EGNOS enabled. The altitude comes from levelling carried out by W.I Stanton.

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G.J. Mullan
38, Delvin Road
Westbury on Trym
Bristol BS10 5EJ
graham.mullan@coly.org.uk

A.A.D. Moody
Fountain Cottage
Priddy Green
Somerset BA5 3BE
aadmoody@talk21.com