

SMALL CHILDREN IN GREBE SWALLET MINE IN 1753, CHARTERHOUSE-ON-MENDIP, SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

Inscriptions including the names of two children Henry Young and John Clark dating to the 18th century have been found in Grebe Swallet, an old mine at Charterhouse, reopened in 1982 by Dr. W.I. Stanton and his digging team. In February 2015 investigations at the Somerset Record Office produced background information from which it has been possible to gain an insight into the graffiti. Henry and John were both small boys when they were in Grebe Swallet, and could possibly have been accompanied by their fathers, John Young and Jeremiah Clark.

INTRODUCTION

Grebe Swallet Mine is located at Charterhouse-on-Mendip (ST504555), in the scheduled monument of Charterhouse Lead Works, No.508 (Somerset Historic Environment Record). The post industrial landscape is now a calcareous grassland valley and Site of Special Scientific Interest, part of The Cheddar Complex (Natural England), covering an area of 441 hectares. The site was noted following the 1968 floods (Hanwell and Newson, 1970) as it was one of three swallet holes which opened up in the valley floor after intense rainfall of approximately 160 mm fell in a 24 hour interval on 10th July.

The site remained dormant until digging commenced at Grebe Swallet in 1981 in the course of which it was noted “from the abundance of galena and the many stemple holes in the rift walls that the cave was in fact an old lead mine” (Stanton, 1991, p.44). In August 1982 on the 122nd day of digging, the mine was re-entered at what became known as the “12 Metre Climb”, leading to a heap of stacked ‘dead’ stone nearly touching the roof. Over this it was observed that a level gallery extended to the left and right, with further heaped deads on both sides. Pushing over these, the gallery was followed to the right. In the belief that a diminutive miner could have wheeled a barrow along there, it was named the Barrow Run and after a few metres a gravel choke was encountered which served as the 1968 flood water stream sink in the floor. Ahead, up a slope (now cement walled) a high natural rift chamber (Sidcot Chamber) was entered, which contained stalactites, two mined shafts in the floor, heaps of deads and a variety of mining relics. A further 30 m of natural phreatic passages with more mining relics led off the chamber to end in chokes (Young Clark’s Passages and Bootprint Chamber) (Stanton, 1991, p.45).

GREBE SWALLET MINE AND ITS MINERS

The mine consists of a maze of natural rifts and larger cavities that, before mining began, were partly or completely full of unconsolidated sediments. These consisted of an unsorted mixture of mud, silt, sand, gravel, stones and rocks and were excavated by the miners for the grains and lumps of galena (‘the stones of lead’) which formed an integral part of the mixture. The miners worked systematically along and down the rifts. Their lighting was dim

and the sediment muddy, so that although they could identify large lumps of galena by their weight, small lumps (walnut size and smaller) escaped their vigilance. The mud, sand and small stones were therefore carried out of the mine and the galena separated, probably by washing in trough buddles (Gough, 1967, p.147). The larger stones and rocks were easily recognised as worthless ‘deads’ and were dumped in worked-out parts of the mine (Stanton, 1991, p.47).



Figure 1. *Miner's digging tool.*

Photo: C. Binding.

For prising galena-bearing mud out of narrow fissures the miners used a “spud”, an 18th century agricultural tool, used in heavy weeding, as of docks or thistles, like a spear, whose iron head was not pointed but instead formed a chisel edge (Figure 1). The rusted head of a spud was found in situ at the top of the 12 m climb by Stanton *et al.* Stemple hollows for beam support placements were bashed into the bedrock with a pointed pick or hammer. Stanton's experiments with a lump hammer demonstrated that a simple stemple hollow could be formed in around five minutes or so (Stanton, 1991, p.49).

Stanton noted that “on muddy ledges in Young Clark's Passage two of the miners stabbed holes with a broken stalactite, scrawled cryptic symbols, and used fingers and stalactites to sign their names (Figure 2). The engravings in the mud indicate that Henry Young and John Clark were deep in the mine on Tuesday 20th November 1753, and judging by the small size of their fingermarks they were children, able to write their names with plenty of flourishes but not otherwise very literate (Figure 3). The inscriptions almost certainly date to the last phase of mining activity, because the lower more exposed and vulnerable ones would have been obliterated by further working. The miners appear to have introduced a population of small creatures that left thin trails crossing muddy ledges near the main working areas but not elsewhere. The miners also broke off and removed many stalactites but missed those 5 m up in Sidcot Chamber possibly as their lights were too dim to reveal them. One thing is certain; they would have surfaced at the end of each day plastered with sticky mud! (Stanton, 1991, pp.51-52).

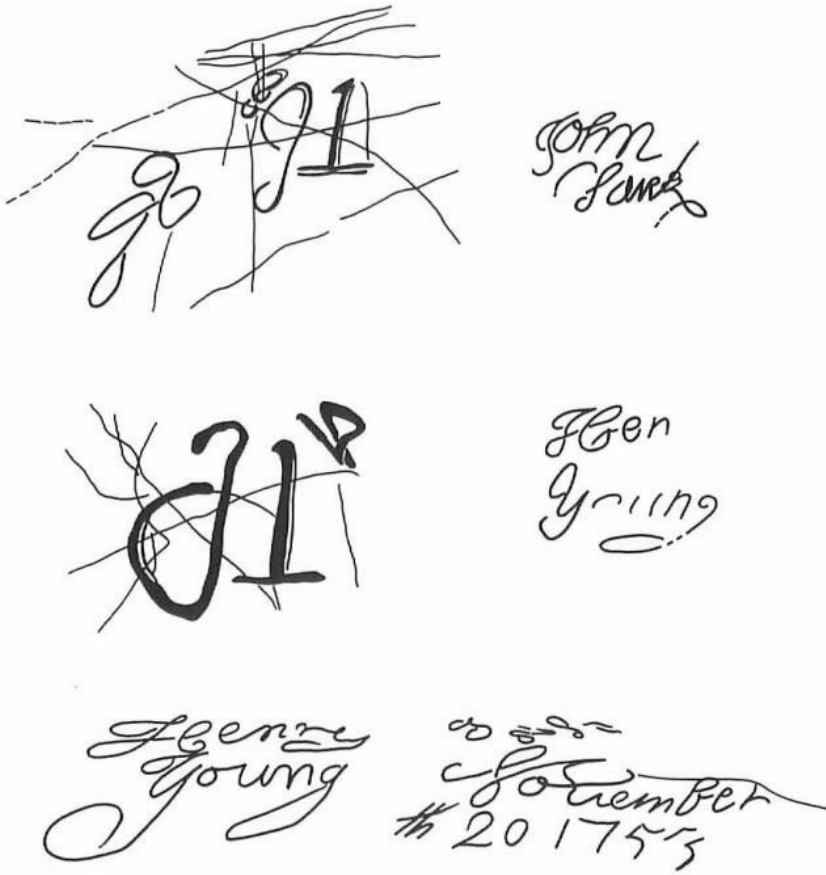


Figure 2. Illustrated signatures and Stanton's "cryptic symbols" left on muddy ledges by 18th century children; the thin lines are traces of small creatures moving across the mud. Most of the inscriptions are reasonably presumed to be the work of Henry Young.

After Stanton, 1991, Figure 6.

The cryptic symbols mentioned by Stanton appear to be Henry's attempts to remind himself how to commence the copperplate writing of his first initial, "H" (Figure 4). Several attempts were made to get the flourish started in the correct direction but once he had the orientation of this correctly worked out he then wrote his name on a wide mud bank with the date adjacent. The relatively high bank would have been beyond reach of John Clark who was some three years his junior and who instead was only able to leave hand and fingermarks in a lower mud bank, which his father Jeremiah subsequently appears to have signed for him.



Figure 3. *Fingermarks in a low mud bank.*

Photo: C. Binding.

THE CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

HENRY YOUNG

Henry Young was baptised on Wednesday 24th November 1745, the son of John and Elizabeth, in the parish of Rowberrow, near Shipham (Somerset Archive Record). Infant mortality was high and it was custom to baptise children as soon as practical in order to protect their immortal souls. There is no register of births but it can be safely presumed Henry was baptised within a month of his birth. Henry Young was eight years old when he visited Grebe Swallet Mine with his father John in November 1753. There is no known record of the mine having an attributable name at that time.

Henry's parents were John and Elizabeth. Their marriage was registered as taking place on 17th April 1745, a Saturday, in the parish of Rowberrow, and given Henry's date of birth (above) his mother was already two to three months pregnant at the time. It was probably therefore a scandal-averting event and Henry's subsequent role as Parish Clerk indicates a family involvement with the Church, over and beyond mere attendance. Elizabeth's maiden



Figure 4. *Attempts at drawing the letter H. See also Figure 2.*

Photo: C. Binding.

Name was also Young and it is worth considering whether she and her husband were already related prior to marriage and if this genetically affected Henry's fortitude since he died at the age of twenty, although there could be any number of reasons for an early death.

Henry was interred at Rowberrow on Saturday 6th July 1765. He was the parish clerk at Rowberrow which attests to his continued education and literacy since his education clearly progressed beyond merely learning to write his name and the date. For a child of such an age and from such a humble rural background to master copperplate writing (Figure 5), correct spelling, and diagnostic problem solving to start his letter H, suggests he may have been a bright lad. The register of his burial notes that "Henry Young departed this life, Clark (sic) of the Parish". All the other register listings for burials are simply names and dates, with no comments – someone went the extra mile when writing the listing for Henry. That he received this unusual additional mention marks him out as a special case amid an otherwise uniform record of burials; certainly to die at such an early adult age during summer would have been a surprising and tragic loss. There is no record of him having been married.

JOHN CLARK

John Clark was baptised on (and presumably born within a month of) Monday 19th February 1748, the son of Jeremiah and Elizabeth, again in the parish of Roberrow (Somerset Archive Record); he was about five and a half years old when he accompanied Henry and his father into Grebe Swallet Mine. Therefore the tiny hand and finger marks (Figure 4) in the mud

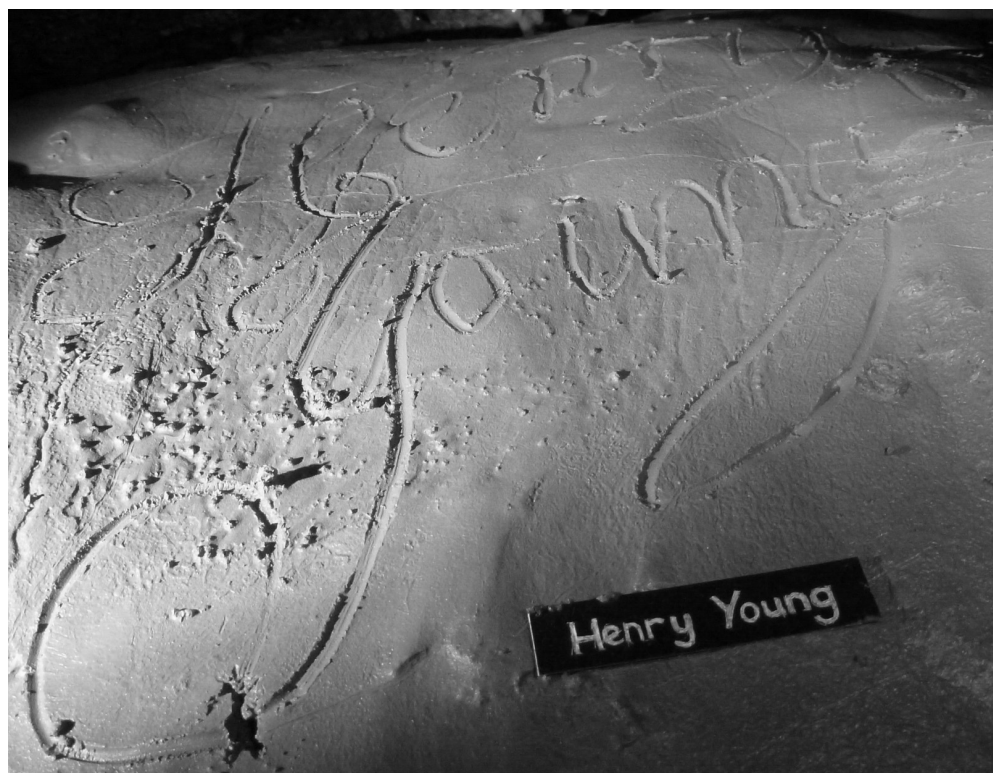


Figure 5. *Henry Young inscribed in mud with a broken stalactite point.*

Photo: C. Binding.

almost certainly belong to him and at such a young age he would have been unable to write his name so presumably his father was the author of the John Clark inscription, the flourishes and flowing curves betraying a well practised signature (Figure 6).

John's parents, Jeremia (sic) Clark and Elizabeth White, married at Rowberrow on Saturday 16th May 1739. They would have been married for approximately nine years by the time John was born and it is therefore a likely presumption that he was not their only child and could have had a number of preceding brothers and/or sisters.

John Clark was 23 years old and recorded as being a labourer at his marriage at Rowberrow to Honour Adams on Sunday 12th May 1771. Henry Young's father, John Young, served as Witness for John Clark at the wedding. Henry Young had died six years earlier and presumably John Clark's father had died by then as well. Having Henry's father taking a legal role in the marriage proves a friendly or enduring link between the two sets of parents and their respective boys some 18 years after their time together in Grebe Swallet Mine.

John Clark died at the age of 62, and was buried at Rowberrow on Tuesday 12th June 1810.

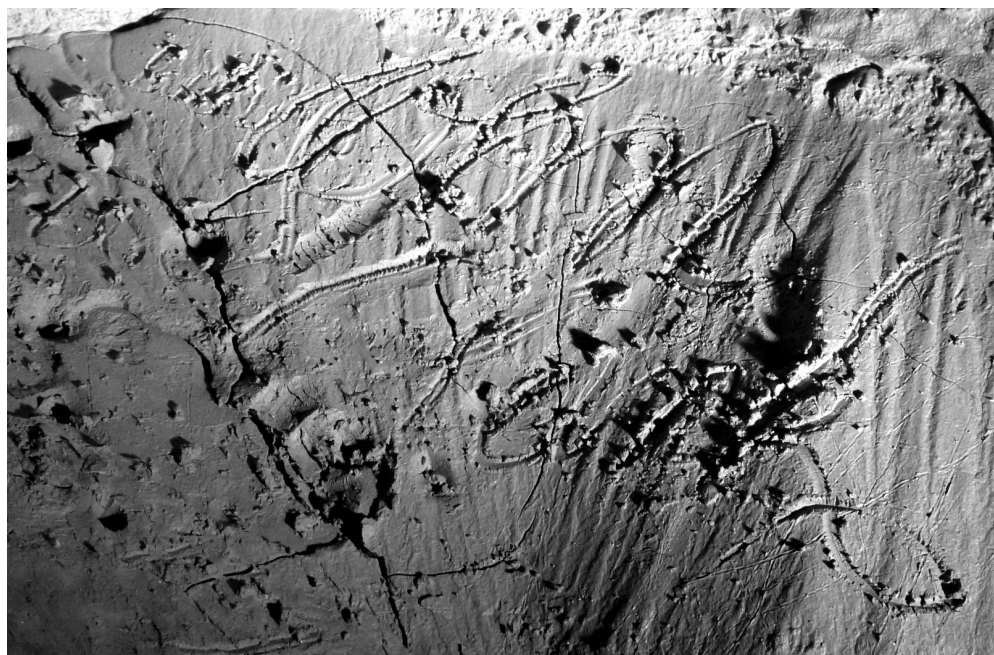


Figure 6. *John Clark inscription.*

Photo: C. Binding.

In November 1753 (Figure 7), when the boys were in Grebe Swallet Mine they clearly had time to occupy themselves, breaking stalactites, prodding them into mud to make numerous holes and scribbling and making marks in the mud. However, they would have been susceptible to cold if they had been kept waiting in the mine for any significant time while their fathers laboured – presuming Stanton’s suggestion that the marks represent a later phase in the mine workings is correct (Stanton, 1991, p,51) the boys may well have been taken on a final tidying up trip with the mine workers John and Jeremiah or to assist with the retrieval of useful tools or perhaps simply to see what their fathers had been doing on their numerous prior working trips. During the eighteenth century an eight year old visiting a mine would not be been an unreasonable or surprising event, but a five-and-a-half year old was less likely to have served any useful role and would have required careful observation and assistance to get that deep into a hazardous working mine.

On the basis of this, it therefore seems possible that the boys were simply joining their fathers on a moderately short visit into the mine, but with enough time left unaccompanied to amuse themselves while their fathers were occupied near at hand, rather than having to endure a full working day.

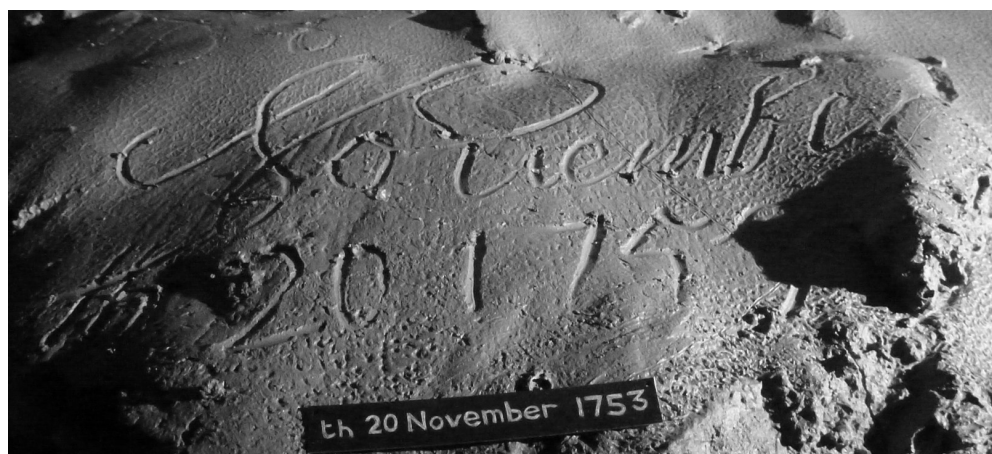


Figure 7. *November, th 20 1753.*

Photo: C. Binding.

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