

# INTRODUCTION TO THE 1960'S EXCAVATIONS AT PICKEN'S HOLE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Picken's Hole is a small partially unroofed cave on Crook Peak, Somerset. It was excavated during the 1960s when significant Palaeolithic faunal assemblages, a small collection of Mousterian stone implements and some Human teeth were discovered. This paper gives the background to the site and to the work carried out there.

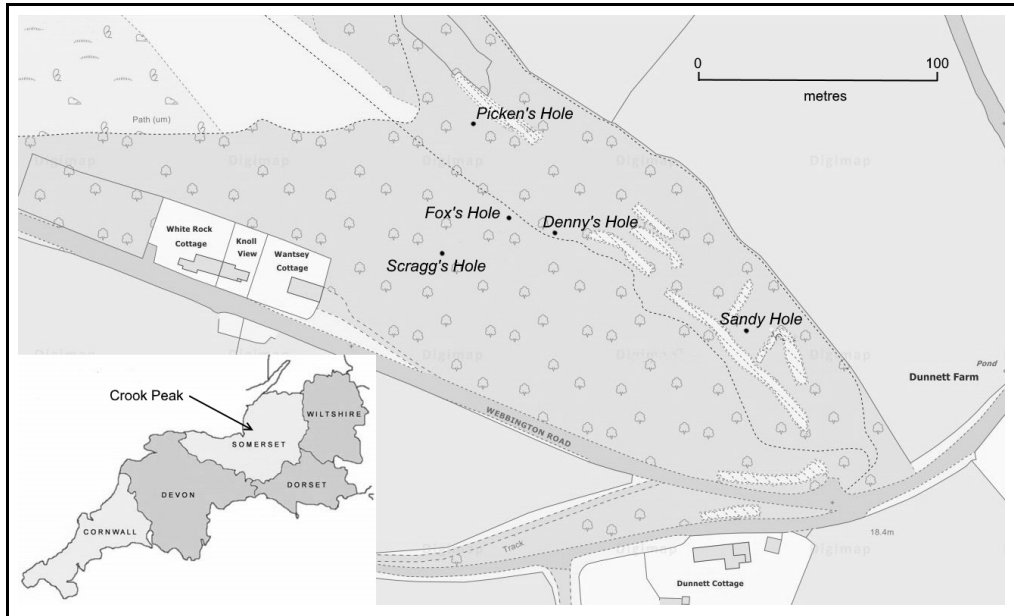
## INTRODUCTION

During May 1961, Mr M.J. Picken was studying the habits of badgers who inhabited a small cave on Crook Peak, in Somerset. In the earth that the creatures were throwing out, he found some teeth. He took these to Bristol City Museum where they were identified as pieces from hyaena and woolly rhinoceros. This information was passed to E.K. Tratman, then President of this Society. In August, when the badgers had finished rearing their young and permission had been gained from the landowner, Sir Nigel Mordaunt Bart. a trial trench was dug, and it became apparent that they had cut into the edge of what seemed to be an extensive deposit outside a cave running back into the hillside. Accordingly, more extensive excavations were carried out in the deposit and these continued until 1966. Much animal bone was recovered along with some human teeth and a number of stone implements.

A preliminary report was published in these *Proceedings* (Tratman, 1964), but for a number of reasons the publication of a more substantial report was delayed. This was further held up by Tratman's death in 1978. Since that time further work has been carried out on aspects of the collection and it has been decided that, although more work could be carried out, it is time that a substantive report was produced. Papers directly concerned with the archaeology and palaeontology of the site are in this volume. Papers concerning the physical geography and geology will be published in the next issue.

## LOCATION

Compton Bishop is on the south side of the Mendip Hills near their western end, 10 km south-east of Weston-super-Mare and 6 km west of Cheddar. The village lies in a small valley floored by Mercia Mudstone, flanked on the north by Wavering Down and on the north-west by Compton Hill and Crook Peak (191m), all composed predominantly of Carboniferous Limestone. The valley is limited on the south-west by a long ridge running south-east from Crook Peak, formed of Clifton Down Limestone with a 30° southerly dip to the south. The northern scarp slope of this ridge has been disturbed by several quarries, the southern dip slope is practically bare limestone down to about 30 m OD, below which a narrow belt of Mercia Mudstone separates it from the floor of the Axe valley which is covered by recent alluvium at about 6 m OD (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Cave locations on Crook Peak, Compton Bishop, Somerset.

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Picken's Hole is found at ST 3965 5502, about 50 m OD and within a roughly semi-circular southward indentation of the crest of the ridge, about 20 m across and 10 m deep. The crest here is at about 55.8 m OD. On the east the site is limited by a weathered cliff 2-3 m high, on the west the cliff is buried beneath the fairly even 25-33° slope of the deposits, into which an old quarry cuts. A test cutting 6 m west of the excavated area exposed bed rock immediately below the turf, showing that the deposits cannot extend far beyond the limits of the excavation. On the south side the cliff was traced by excavation down to about 49 m, below which it appeared to be undercut. In this area a cave passage, roughly circular in cross section and about 1.5 m in diameter, was found in the cliff face. This was traced southward for about 5 m, beyond which it became too constricted for further work. Another cave passage was suspected beneath the cliff on the east side where a badger hole was seen descending steeply eastwards in loose angular rock debris. Within the excavated area bedrock was only reached on the north side, where it sloped steeply down to the lip of the old quarry at 44.7 m OD.

Several other small caves are situated nearby on the crest of the ridge. Denny's Hole, the largest of them, is about 30 m south of Picken's Hole. The nearest is Fox's Hole, about 15 m south of Picken's Hole and whose base, at about 50 m, is on nearly the same level as the Picken's Hole passage. A complete list of these caves may be found in two articles by Legg (1993 a and b). Scragg's Hole was dug by Willie Stanton, the Sidcot schoolboys and others between 1943 and 1961-2. This latter site has sometimes been confused with Picken's Hole in literature, and the two have been conflated in the Somerset Historic Environmental Record, where site 10459 is described as "Picken's Hole (Scragg's Hole)" and gives references to digs at both of these caves. Strangely, that record also gives two slightly different grid references. For further details of this site, see Russ and Summerfield (this volume).

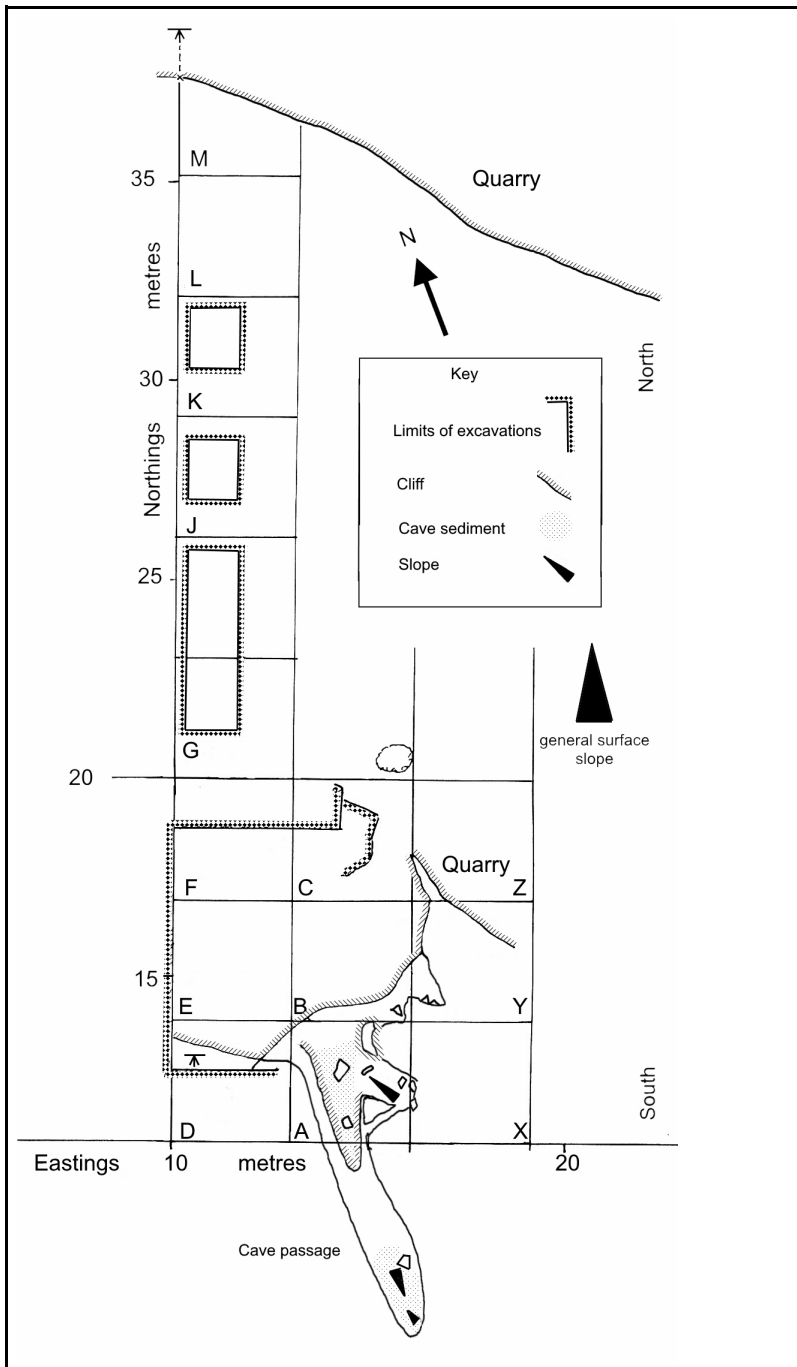


Figure 2. Picken's Hole excavation site plan.

## EXCAVATION

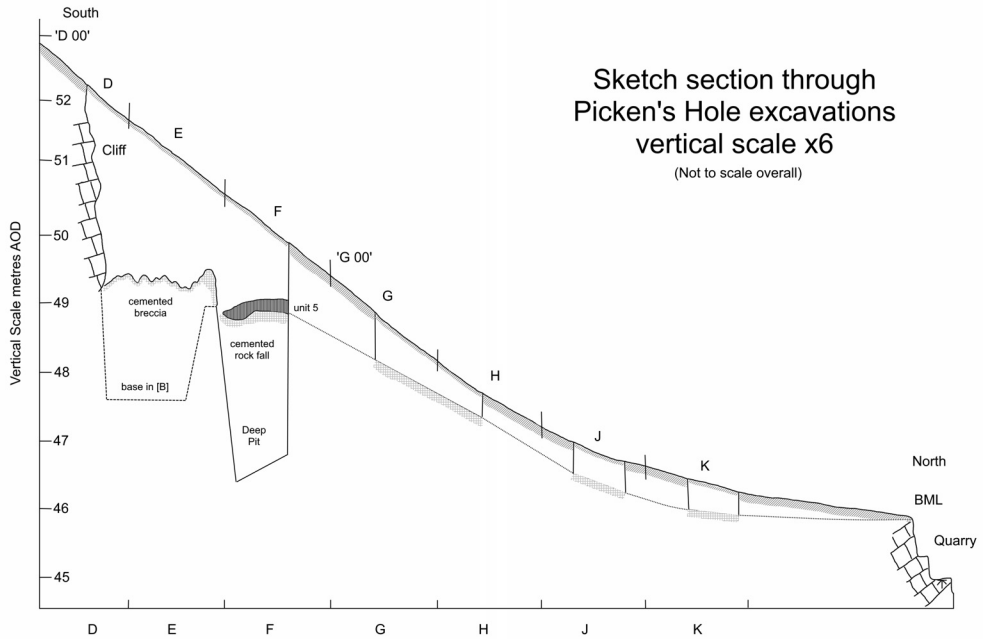
The badger holes identified by Mr. Picken were at two levels on a steep slope below a low cliff, suggesting that the badgers might be tunnelling into a filled-in cave or rock shelter (see ApSimon and Smart, Appendix 1 p 257 this volume). Because it was clear that the badgers were progressively destroying the site, excavations were begun in August 1961 and continued at intervals, mainly under the direction of Tratman, until March 1967. A.M. ApSimon took part in this work from time to time and directed longer periods of excavation in August 1964 and August 1965. Finds and records were deposited in the Spelaeological Society's museum in Bristol University, under the site code, M30. Details may be found in the site catalogue and in several contemporaneous notebooks held in the archive.

The earliest work, from August 1961, under Tratman consisted of a 'trial trench' in what became squares A, B and C (see Figure 2 and ApSimon and Smart, pp 245-259 this volume). Although a record of the stratigraphy was kept, finds at this time were not fully recorded in 3D, but only by layer or sub-layer. In October 1961, the site grid of 10 ft squares, as seen in Figure 2 was developed. The grid was laid out using a downslope orientation, where downslope was described as North. In fact it is orientated 20° west of True North. In this publication the various faces are described in relation to this grid rather than to True North. After 1961, work, especially the excavation of squares D, E and F, included precise 3D locations of finds. However, the final parts of the excavation from August 1965 abandoned the detailed 3D recording as volunteers found the system confusing and difficult to use and instead recorded only depth and a smaller 2 ft x 2 ft 'quadrat' sub-division of the larger 10 ft x 10 ft squares.

The Units and sub-units (Smart and ApSimon *op. cit.*) were originally traced laterally from the Trial Trench but it proved impractical to carry uniform numbering of these sub-divisions across the whole of the excavated area, partly because there was so much lateral variation and partly owing to the partial collapse of the baulk between squares B and E and thus the loss of the key reference section on the west side of square B. After this, therefore, a system of labelled contexts was introduced. In this, each square had recorded a vertical series of contexts described, based on observed contrasts in the sediments. These contexts form the basis for the detailed description of the sediments (Smart and ApSimon, *op. cit.*). They are set within the major sediment Units first described at the site (see, for example, Tratman, 1964) but are lacking the previously numbered sub-units, 3a, 3b etc. On two of the original section drawings, the Units are labelled in Roman numerals. It is not now known when these were introduced nor when they were dropped.

Original section drawings, or fair copies thereof, exists for sections of the west face of the Trial Trench (squares ABC), the west face of squares DEF, the north face of F, the north face of D and a less complete east face of DEF.

As noted above, a short preliminary account was published in 1964 (Tratman, 1964). Further short accounts were published by ApSimon (1986) and Tratman (1975). The site has been cited by Currant and Jacobi (2001, 2011a, 2011b) in their comprehensive reviews of British Late Pleistocene biostratigraphy. This issue of *Proceedings* includes specialist reports on aspects of the work. These are presented as separate papers and include detailed accounts of the mammalian fauna, lithic tools, stratigraphy, sedimentology, human remains and radiometric dating.



**Figure 3.** Sketch section through the excavation. Not to scale.

Subsequent to the Society's excavations, two items, a wolf jaw and a bear canine were presented to the Natural History Museum by W.R. Hamilton in 1969 and that museum also has a few dozen identifiable specimens, including reindeer, bison, small mammal and frog labelled "Picken's Hole, Lower fauna ... Nov. 1993 APC & RMJ" [A.P. Currant and R.M Jacobi] (S. Parfitt *pers. comm*).

Owing to the passage of time from the cessation of excavation to the preparation of these reports, some aspects of the interpretation are now unclear. In particular, there are problems with the interpretation of the stratigraphy, which are addressed by ApSimon and Smart (*op. cit.*) and with the fauna, as part of the collection of rodent remains has been lost and some stratigraphic locations of collections of bird and amphibian bones are now unclear.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed over the last half-century to the work carried out at this site. Particular thanks need to go to the late Sir Nigel Mourdaunt Bart. for giving permission for the site to be excavated, to Mr M.J. Picken for bringing the site to the Society's attention, to the late E.K. Tratman for so much of the field work, and to Desmond Donovan, Tony Stuart, Mike Bishop, Chris Richards and Caroline Rosen for their input.

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