

## Read's Cavern — Final Report Excavation of the Exterior

BY E. K. TRATMAN, B.D.S.

During the year 1925 the excavation of the interior of this cave was completed, but the site of the entrance used by the pre-historic inhabitants, and the extent and duration of the occupation, if any, of the outside had not been determined. There were indications inside the cave which formed a rough guide to the site of the Early Iron Age entrance. However, a detailed survey predicted that it had been covered by a large quantity of material fallen from the cliff face which had become mixed with a very tenacious clay. To remove this it was decided to employ such labour as time and funds permitted. The majority of the work was done in the dry spell of 1929, when the material was much easier to work than in the previous wetter years.

After the layer of black earth indicating the level of the pre-historic entrance had been identified, labourers were allowed to excavate to one foot above this, and the actual tracing of the "black band" was done by our own members. The area of the excavation is shewn in the plan (*Proc. U.B.S.S.*, Vol. 1, plate XXI, squares VKLM 30-36). The depth of the excavation varied from five to fifteen feet, the average being about ten feet. This large variation was due to two factors; the steep natural slope of the ground up to the face of the cliff, and the slope of the "hearth level" under the overhanging cliff down to the cave.

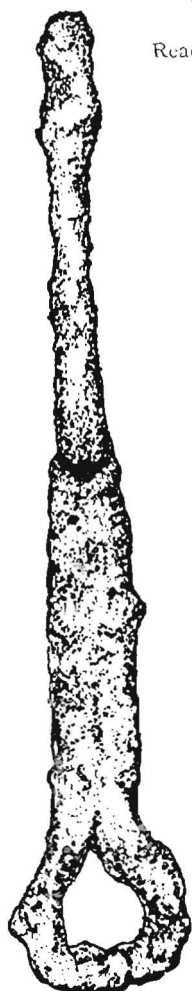
When the excavations were completed the entrance gallery was found to consist of a passage sloping downwards and inwards from the actual entrance (J 30, 31, 32), at a slight angle, and ending in a short and easy clamber down to the floor of the main chamber (G 25). This passage ran approximately south-east to north-west, having its north side and roof formed by the solid rock. The floor was composed of a thin layer of stones and clay resting on large blocks with air spaces between. The south side was irregularly formed of piled up blocks of limestone through which rays of light and currents of air could find their way. These blocks were so precariously poised that it looked as though the slightest touch would bring them crashing down.

All the way along the passage, and over most of the area excavated outside, there was a very thin layer of the hearth material similar to that covering the floor of the main chamber; occasionally, where there were cracks between the stones, this black mud was deeper.

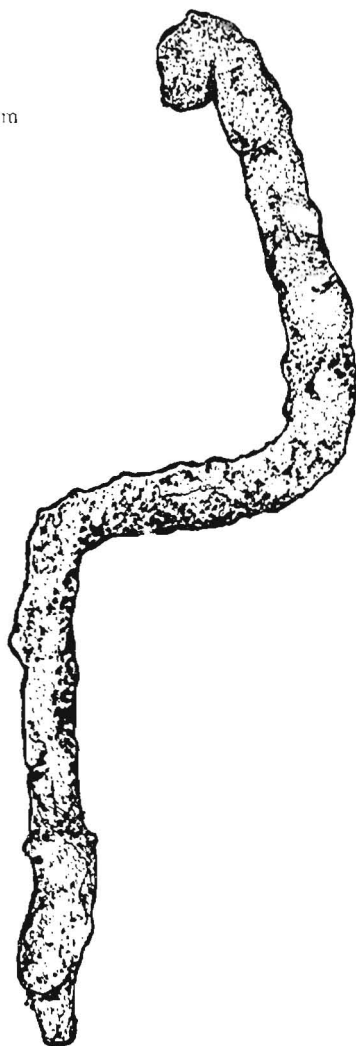


FIG. 1.

Read's Cavern. Potsherd from exterior of Cave.



Side View.



Elevation.

FIG. 2. Read's Cavern. Key from exterior of Cave.

Scale  $\frac{1}{1}$

The whole layer probably represents the mixture of mud and charcoal brought out of the cave on the feet of the inhabitants, for tests carried out since the discovery of the cave have shewn that such may well have happened.

Only a few sherds of pottery were found, some in the passage, and some outside, one of the latter bore a form of decoration new to this cave (Fig I). At the actual portal of the passage, leading into the cave a small key or latch lifter was found on the floor. This could have served as the key of the door to the cave, though no definite traces of a door post could be found. There was, however, at this point rather a deep pocket of charcoal between the stones of the floor. This is the fourth key to be found in the cave, all of different sizes, this specimen being almost of pocket size (Fig. 2). From the entrance the "black band" or hearth was traceable upwards and outwards in a series of rough steps, five in number. It was impossible to say whether or no any of them had been artificially placed, but they certainly facilitated egress from the cave. To the east, south and west, the hearth was traced to its edge. To the west of the entrance it lay at a higher level, and ran over a number of large blocks which barred the way into the cave, so that these must have been in position when the cave was inhabited in the Early Iron Age. Immediately on top of the hearth lay another series of very large blocks with finer material on top again. This arrangement supports the theory that the cave occupation was abandoned, because the entrance was sealed by large falls from the overhanging cliff outside.

Against the cliff, at the west end of the excavations some very large limestone blocks rested on top of the hearth, which was itself resting on others poised above the cave in a most precarious manner. It was not deemed advisable to go to the expense and risk of moving these upper blocks, as to do so would probably have resulted in the sudden collapse of the whole area into the cave to the grave risk of the excavators. If, as has been supposed, some of the individuals who lived in the cave were caught by the collapsing cliff face, it is under these boulders that their bones would be found. Such bones would certainly be smashed in the process of breaking up, and removing the material from on top of them, as some of the blocks weighed several tons. This then is the only area in which the edge of the hearth material has not been traced.

The hearth material was so barren that it is safe to say that it does not represent an occupation area outside the cave, and that the occupation was one of the interior only. Read's Cavern is then completely excavated ten years after its discovery.