

Fairy Toot: the "Lost Cave of Burrington"

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In the century and a half of its currency the question of the "lost cave of Burrington" has been vested with something of a legendary character and, as with many legends, this is due to the obscurity of the factual foundation. The perplexities and misapprehensions attending this small mystery are such as to make the telling a matter of some slight interest, perhaps, to our fellow members. The following note is an amalgamation of independent inquiries pursued by us which proved to be directed along the same lines.

SOURCES

1. Perhaps the best-known authority for the "lost cave" is Rutter (*Delineations*, 1829, p. 118). After describing, under the heading "An Ancient Catacomb," the cave now known as Aveline's Hole where about 50 skeletons are said to have been found in 1795, he proceeds: "About half a mile distant, another of these curious places of sepulture was discovered, which was calculated to contain not less than one hundred skeletons."

2. Eight years before Rutter, Seyer (*Memoirs of Bristol*, 1821, I, p. 108) retailed the same information in words echoing the primary source which, like the careful historian that he was, he duly recorded in a footnote. This source is *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1805, LXXV, p. 409, and was said by Seyer to embody a further reference to LIX, 303. Seyer adds, however, in a note that he was unable to locate the latter.

3. In actuality, the second reference was added, presumably by "Mr. Urban", in order to particularize a vaguer mention in the letter given at LXXV, 409; but this internal reference is not LIX, 303, but LIX, 393: the tail of the figure nine is very badly printed and could have been wholly absent in Seyer's copy or indistinguishable in a poor light. At LIX, 393, we find the Rev. Thomas Bere's first letter describing the long barrow at Butcombe, Fairy Toot, the destruction of which was then proceeding.

The primary source is as follows:

Mr. URBAN,

May 3. (1805)

The instrument (fig. 7 [a Middle Bronze Age flanged axe]) was found in a natural cavern, 28 feet below the surface, on a ledge in the rock at Burrington Coombe, in Somersetshire, about five miles from Stanton Drew.

Within 50 yards of it, in 1795, was found in another natural cavern, 20 feet deep, an antient catacomb or interment of the

dead, consisting of near 50 perfect skeletons lying parallel to each other, some of whose bones were petrified.

. . . In your volume for 1789* there is an account of another catacomb discovered within half a mile of this, which contained near a hundred of these skeletons, not indeed petrified.

Yours, &c.

H. W.

* LIX, 393.

We have been unable to discover who H. W. was. He was not the "H. Wylde" mentioned by Rutter (*op. cit.*, p. 116) as a late rector of Burrington. Wylde's initials were, in fact, S. T. and not H. A note on the site of the discovery of the flanged axe is given at the end of the paper.

COMMENT ON THE SOURCES

1. It is above all remarkable that Rutter, who specifically includes Antediluvian Bone Caverns in the title as a special feature of his book, should have failed to give more than a sentence about so notable and romantic a discovery as a catacomb of a hundred skeletons. Even though forty years had passed since the time of discovery when Rutter wrote, some further details would surely have been forthcoming from local inhabitants. We are forced to the conclusion that the threadbare remark in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was the sole record known to Rutter of the find. Further, it is likely that Rutter's account is based, not on the original source, but on Seyer's remarks, for had Rutter verified the evidence he would, with ordinary luck, have come upon the true internal reference to Fairy Toot, and the myth of the "lost cave" would not have arisen.

2. Seyer gives the cavern at Burrington as the site of the 1795 discovery. Rutter is additionally aware of a second cavern in the Combe, Goatchurch, which is given a paragraph in his book, as are other Mendip caves. The *Gentleman's Magazine* contains no further notice of caves or catacombs at Burrington, either in the 1789 or in any other volume. Moreover, neither H. W., nor Rutter, nor Seyer, explicitly states that the site of the 1789 discovery was a cave. That is a modern assumption (as Balch, *Mendip: Its Swallet Caves and Rock Shelters*, 1937, pp. 120-121). Rutter's loose phrase, "another of these curious places of sepulture," is the closest we come to it; but we have seen that Rutter is neither the primary authority, nor, for that matter, a particularly dependable one. Furthermore, Collinson's *History* of 1791, which might be presumed certainly to have contained reference to so singular a discovery had it in fact existed, is silent also.

3. We are thus left with the reference in the *Gentleman's Magazine* to Fairy Toot, a reference which, in the light of our examination of the evidence, is direct and unequivocal. Collinson, Seyer, and Rutter all describe it.

The first could not possibly have connected it with the catacomb of a hundred skeletons—the "lost cave"—the literary history of which dates from 1805 and not from 1789; the second does not connect the two, owing to the faulty printing of the cross-reference in the *Gentleman's Magazine*; and the third does not do so, presumably because, as we have suggested, he was copying from Seyer and not from the original source. There are, however, two difficulties in the identification. The first is that there is no suggestion in any of our evidence that as many as a hundred skeletons were found at Fairy Toot. The second is that Fairy Toot lies more than three miles from Aveline's Hole, whereas our source, H. W., says "within half a mile".

The first difficulty is readily explainable as sheer exaggeration. Bere himself is not explicit on the number of skeletons discovered; indeed, only about four cells and part of the passage were explored by him, owing to a fear that the roof would collapse. "Many skulls" are said to have been found in each cell. From measurement it was calculated that there was room for ten or eleven cells on either side of the passage; Bere's plan (*Gent. Mag.*, LXII, p. 1183) shows eight on either side. Simple multiplication could produce a high total number of interments. As to the disparity in distance, H. W. errs in the distance between Burrington and Stanton Drew, which he makes five miles instead of eight miles direct or about eleven by road. It is, however, more difficult to account for an error of over 500 per cent in a short distance than one of 60 per cent or 100 per cent. A possible reason for the error may be found in the fact that Bere, who gives his address as "Blagdon House", speaks of Fairy Toot as "in the neighbourhood of my residence" (*Gent. Mag.*, LIX, 392). If H. W. was not a local man he may have taken his "half a mile" from this, having seen on a map that Blagdon is scarcely a mile from Burrington.

H. W. was writing primarily to communicate the discovery of the bronze axe. The additional material is merely makeweight. The more recent of the two "catacomb" discoveries (Aveline's Hole) was ten years old when he wrote, the other sixteen. It is therefore not surprising that few details are given, while the actual error in the distance from Burrington to Stanton Drew shows that H. W. did not take great trouble over the accuracy of his information.

There is, indeed, no reason to suppose that H. W. had actually seen Fairy Toot; the apparent error in distance would seem to show that he could not possibly have seen both Fairy Toot and the Combe sites. His letter lacks its address of origin (as do so many in the *Gentleman's Magazine*) and it is accordingly quite possible that he was not a resident in the district, but simply someone to whom the information he records had been sent and which he thought worthy of a note in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The fact that Seyer was apparently ignorant of his identity lends colour to this

suggestion, which obviously strengthens any case based on ambiguity and the likelihood of error.

NOTES

1. *The site of the flanged axe.* We have not identified the cavern in which the bronze axe is said to have been found, and if the distance of 50 yards from the 1795 discovery (Aveline's Hole) is anything like correct, it was no cave known to-day. The most probable hypothesis is that it was broken into by quarrymen in the large, now disused, quarry immediately to the north of Aveline's Hole and on the same side of the Combe, where Plumley's Den was discovered in 1874. Subsequently the cave might have been either filled in or quarried away. The expression "28 feet below the surface" suggests a more or less vertical cave of the same type as Plumley's Den. Other possible sites are the rocks above Aveline's Hole, or the crags opposite in the neighbourhood of the Rock of Ages.

The flanged axe has not been traced either, though there is a possibility that it still exists in some collection. It is noticed by Dobson, *Archæology of Somerset*, 1931, p. 232.

2. *Dean Buckland and the 1795 Catacomb.*—Buckland, in *Reliquiæ Diluvianæ*, 1823, p. 164, introduces a further misapprehension in connexion with the 1795 discovery. He says that Collinson mentions the discovery of human bones encrusted with stalagmite at Burrington Combe. Buckland is describing Aveline's Hole, and there is of course no possible reference in Collinson, whose history was published in 1791, four years before the cave was opened. Collinson describes no Burrington caves.

3. *The Bones.*—One final point may be made in connexion with the mystery of the "lost cave", namely the definite antithesis contained in H. W.'s letter in regard to the condition of the bones. Those found in the natural cavern included some which were petrified; those from the "lost cave", i.e., Fairy Toot, are explicitly mentioned as not petrified, a state which accords with their having been found in a long barrow although it does not, of course, exclude the possibility of their having been found in a cave.