

## Caves and stones

Mendip not only famous for its limestone hills, but also the caverns carved out, beneath the surface, over thousands of years by underground springs and rivers. Many people know of caves like Goatchurch Cavern, Swildon's Hole, Longwood Swallet and of course Cox's and Gough's Caves in Cheddar. Here, in Compton Bishop and Cross we also have a few worth mentioning – but with a note of caution. Caving is dangerous so do not go alone and if considering anything that looks a little awkward go with an experienced caver or join a caving club. A safe and enjoyable way of experiencing the netherworld is by having a go at Adventure Caving at Cheddar Caves where you can experience crawls and squeezes under expert supervision with all the correct equipment supplied.

Here are some snippets about the rocks and stones around our parish.

### Saxon Boundary Wall

You will probably have seen the stone wall that runs along the Mendip ridge from Kings Wood up to the foothills of Crook Peak. This has been restored by The National Trust and a lot of volunteer workers. This wall is significant, not only for keeping a boundary between our Parish and Winscombe but as an ancient Saxon boundary wall. The Saxon Charters of Somerset, granted by William the Conqueror to Giso, Bishop of Wells around 1080 AD, describes its location :-

*“First to the Rock on the Ridge (Crook Peak) and the east to Narrow Way and then along the way to the east of Ealms Cattlefold (this is now Hill Farm) along the way to The Shute and so to the path uphill (This is now Stickle Path on the Axbridge side at the top of Shute Shelve, its name is derived from the Saxon word Stycela) along the ride through the woods (North of Axbridge) to Callow Hill straight down to the sand pits then straight to the Hollow Way (probably Hornes Lane, north of the old station) along the chalk brook out to where the hedgerow where reeds grow, to The Axe to the weir at Shallow Ford (maybe near Cross Bridge) and so to the White Copse, from the copse to the blind river (blind river meant dried up river and probably refers to Crabbs Hole on the south side of the river near Kennel Lane) and so again to The Axe along the streams of Loxan along the Lox boundary to Christon and the boundary of Barton and so up over the hill and east to The Rock on the Ridge.”*

The influence of the Saxons in our area can be seen in names, for example, Crook Peak is derived from Crúc meaning 'pointed hill' and Mendip comes from Maen Dippa which meant hill with pits. Saxon settlements were called 'tons' and so we get Webbing**ton**, Compt**on** and Bour**ton**.

## **The Devil's Stone**

Folklore suggests that this is one of two stones thrown by the Devil from Shute Shelve in a contest.

There was once a famous strongman in the region. The devil got fed up hearing of his exploits and decided to challenge him to a match of strength. The two contestants and all the local people gathered on Shute Shelve Hill. The devil hurled a huge stone with all his might down into the Vale of the Axe below. When the strongman's turn came, his stone went much further, and landed just east of Lower Weare.

The Devil's stone still remains, in the field south of Bourton Lane. It is about 4ft high, and is claimed to be the shape of Crook Peak. The strongman's stone was lost, its exact site is unclear. The Devil also threw a shovel full of material down when he dug Cheddar Gorge and the result was Brent Knoll.

## **Coral Cave**

This cave has an interesting history and has been written about in various journals and books. Here is a synopsis :-

Herbert Balch was a pioneer of recreational caving and, In 1895, he founded the Wells Museum to house his growing archaeological and mineral collection and became a popular lecturer on subjects such as "The Caves of Somerset". Around the turn of the century he was with Ernest Baker and the famous Gough brothers on their way to Axbridge to look for a previously explored cave. On passing through Cross they got wind of an unexplored cave. About two years before, a farmer was blasting a stone to line a cattle trough and blew a hole in the top of a subterranean cavity. He roped two 30 foot ladders together, lowered himself down but could see only blackness. He sealed the entrance.

Baker borrowed picks and hammers and along with six helpers broke the stone and was the first to go down on a 70 foot long rope. 60 feet down he found a bell shaped chamber. The rocks were carved and pitted as by swirling torrents of days gone by, only the dripping water remained. He picked up a stone with a mass of dog-toothed crystals as large as walnuts. At the bottom of the cave were myriad's of exquisite spicules of carbonate with specks of red, orange and amber. Thousands littered the floor like tendrils of coral 3/8 of an inch long. He commented, "Such formation is not rare but such beauty of shape and hue is rare". These were set in patterns of squares, circles, triangles, etc.. He then climbed 100 ft up the scree which further extended to a tiny grotto 240 ft from that point.

I visited this cave a number of years ago and it has changed. The 60 foot sheer drop into the black void was as breathtaking as the arduous climb back up a wire ladder. Alas, the effect of carbide lamps, souvenir collectors and mud has taken away any hint of the "...beauty... and hue..." . There is a wet and muddy floor, the 100 feet of scree leading to the tiny grotto is completely

sealed with mud. An attempt to dig this out was abandoned many years ago. For safety reasons the cave was sealed in 1945 after a school boy had an accident and now the locked manhole cover is controlled by Axbridge Caving Club.

### **Cross Quarry Cave**

In 1925 quarrying revealed a cave in Cross quarry. Unfortunately the demands of quarrying meant that the cave was lost, except for the tiny 'geode' – a cavity lined with huge calcite crystals. Dog-Toothed quartz crystals are commonly found around the entrance. Most of the cave lining has been 'removed' over the years. Along the eastern aspect of the quarry some traces of ochre can be seen. Ochre mining was important for Loxton and Axbridge where three ochre cave, pits and open cast digs provide a 200 ft rift.

### **Denny's Hole**

The name of this cave is thought to derive from what was a nearby small church, or grotto dedicated to St Dennis, It is also known as Phelp's Hole. Denny's Hole appears as a rather dangerous hole in the ground and rather overgrown. It was used by the Home Guard during the Second World War, to store ammunition.

When you first engage this cave, its cavernous entrance quickly dispenses with any light there may be, you are left with just the hollow sound of dripping water. There are small passages leading off the main chamber, one takes you through a small squeeze into a small chamber where a further tight corkscrew squeeze takes you further down amongst water worn rocks it is certainly not a place for other than very experienced caving teams – and for all that there is nothing at the end of this. It has been speculated that there is a route down to Rackley but no trace has been found at either site in recent years.

### **Fox's Hole**

Situated on the Crook Peak-Rackley spine, this is a tight fissure leading to into a low chamber which was probably linked to Denny's hole before it was blocked with mud. Not very accessible—you'd have to be very thin to get down this one!

### **White Cliff Cave**

On the rocky cliff to west of Bourton Coombe, to the south of Wavering Down almost hidden by a boulder is the entrance to this cave, which is more of a short tunnel. The tunnel slopes down to a second entrance which is at the lower side of the cliff about 3 metres from the ground.

These next caves are small and almost impossible to find now, being overgrown and choked with rock and earth falls.

## **Wolf Den**

A very small cave on the Barton side of Wavering Down where a dig, in 1944, revealed wolf and horse bones coming from the late Pleistocene period.

## **Scraggs hole**

A small 'short' cave on the south side of Crook Peak showed signs of Roman/British occupation before the roof collapsed.

## **Picken's Hole**

This was a small hole dug on the North side of the Crook Peak ridge, presumably by a person called Picken. This was an archaeological dig which revealed a layer of petrified sand and a number of bones from the last glacial period. Bones of the bear-ox-reindeer and horse-rhino-lion-mammoth-deer-ox-hyena groups.

## **Bone Cave at Banwell**

This was discovered by miners in 1825, when masses of Pleistocene bones were revealed. The cave was re-dug by a William Beard who removed most of the more interesting bones and stacked the rest around the walls. This is privately owned but has recently been re-opened to the public once per year and is well worth a visit.

## **Mining**

Mining around our area was significant from early Roman times when Charterhouse had a thriving lead mining and smelting industry. Lead, in those days, could virtually be picked up from the ground, and had a high level of arsenide which gives the smelted ingots a 'fingerprint' which provided proof that Mendip lead had been exported as far as The Holy Lands.

At around 1430, German miners introduced divining or dowsing for minerals and digging trenches to locate the strata. This method created Gruffs which were mainly an attempt by the local labourer and his family to cash in on the mining that was. Many examples of 'Gruffy Ground' can be seen in Kings Wood and along the ridge of Mendip towards Crook Peak. In the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century one vein of manganese was found 1 mile east of Shute Shelve which caused sporadic searching for pockets which carried on until 1915.

This article was compiled in 2005 using local knowledge, research from Bristol's Reference Library and Nick Barrington's book on Mendip Caving. Nick owned The Oak House in Axbridge which was the HQ of the Axbridge Caving Club in the early 1970's

*.Richard Parker*