

UBLEY HILL POT by Malcolm Cotter

PROSPECTING

On a fine day in mid 1960 a small party consisting of Barry Ottewell, Arthur Cox and myself decided to stir ourselves into action by looking for a shake hole in a field near Cow Hole shown on the O.S. 2½" map.

Fortunately we had left the map behind and overshot our objective, ending up by Cow Hole. After wondering how much work would be needed to reopen it and keep it open, our walk took us on towards Ubley Hill Farm road. There was a wonderful view to be had in the direction of Bristol. The



UBLEY HILL POT.
BEFORE DIGGING.
DON DOVASTON.

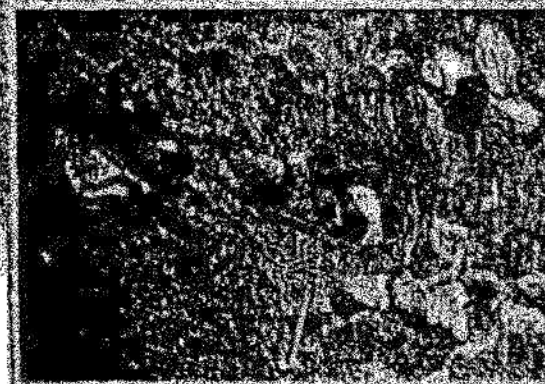


UBLEY HILL POT.
FIRST CAVITY. DON DOVASTON.



UBLEY HILL POT
JUST AFTER FIRST VIEW OF HOLE.

UBLEY HILL POT.
WORKING PARTY. M. D. COTTER



UBLEY HILL POT.
THE FIRST FETCH.
DON DOVASTON.

field we were in sloped upwards gently to our left and looked perfectly flat. Just to satisfy myself that we had made a thorough examination I walked towards the centre of the area. At about half way to my delight the surface dropped away from me to form a deep shakehole invisible from a few yards away. I went down to the bottom but could not see any obvious bedrock. All, however, agreed that the site gave promise of a cave.

DIGGING AT UBLEY HILL

Some weeks after finding Ubley Hill shake hole, George Savage and I went back to measure its vital statistics. We found the depth to be 19ft and the diameter 90ft.

Things rested for a while until we heard that another caving party had been in the area. This stimulated action for the site was an obvious one to dig, although perhaps not so easy to find.

August bank holiday was a week ahead so we decided to make a preliminary start then.

Saturday came round and found a large number of people at the cottage, so permission for digging was obtained. From Mr Howell provided we fenced the area off to prevent his hens falling into the hole. A party of five went to start the dig whilst two more of us cut some stakes.

When we joined the main party nothing had been started as they had been unable to decide where to dig. A number of test holes were then dug at regular intervals around the shake hole and after about an hour work commenced on my test hole as it looked the most promising. The site was down dip as far as we could make out and contained many water worn boulders. Two of us took photographs at intervals in order to keep a record of our work. Numerous rounded boulders were removed, thus showing signs of water action. If the shake had only been caused by the collapse of the ground I would have expected angular rocks.

By early afternoon a promising cavity had been revealed with vertical fluting of the rock. It was not large but continued by way of a tube some two inches wide. At a depth of about five feet a large rock was encountered. It took some time to remove, as there was a tendency to rock it to and fro rather than dig round it and rope it out. When the rock came out there was a general rush to the face for a round hole about a foot across had been revealed. It curved downwards out of view in a most tantalising way.

At the end of the day our small hole still held out on us. We considered that the chance of an early break-through was in fact remote.

The following day the working party was reduced to allow enough people to dig at Coopers Hole. There was obviously plenty of enthusiasm since digging continued through

several showers of rain. As we progressed we could hear rocks falling beneath us, whilst tossing stones ahead into the small tube-like cavity we were following produced a distant crash after a short interval. At this stage it was considered wise to belay the man who was digging lest the floor should collapse taking him with it.

It was not long before we had broken through. A small squeeze was visible, which led into a large rocky chamber. We were in the top corner and there was obviously a pitch to be negotiated.

EXPLORATION

Peter Goddard was the first to go down. It was just as well that we had cleared the entrance until it looked easy because we found that in actual fact it was a tight and awkward squeeze. Anxiously we waited for the report from the bottom. We were soon to learn that the chamber led onwards into a passage. I went down next and found myself climbing down the side of a rocky chamber of ample proportions. The pitch was 20ft and except for the initial squeeze, was very easy.

I now led the way into the passage, the floor of which was steeply inclined and deeply rutted. The surface was covered with slippery mud and unstable scree. A black pit covered the width of the passage. The next man now began his descent, dislodging a boulder that swept past us to disappear into the darkness below.

We all moved more cautiously now, as there were numerous loose rocks to be removed for ones safety. It was possible to traverse over the pit and reach the far side. The view was of a pitch some thirty feet deep at one end of a rift. The bottom of the rift sloped to the right down a muddy bank.

More ladder was brought down, together with some wooden bars for a stand off at the top. At about 15ft down one could come off the ladder onto a ledge covered with loose rocks. It proved better to go along the ledge and down the rock, rather than use the ladder which hung between two flakes.

From the top of the mud bank I saw a large chamber, the end of which was too far off for me to distinguish with my head lamp. The rest of the party arrived and we all set off downwards.

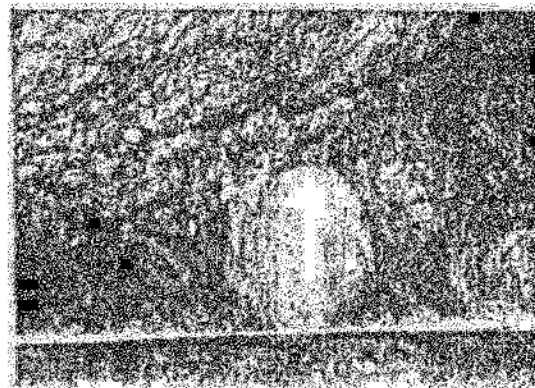
Half way down the chamber we saw a skeleton which we assumed to be that of a sheep. Further searching revealed more bones poking through the mud. The lower part of the chamber had a small passage leading downwards. This led us into a passage with a heavy drip from one corner of the roof. The way became tight and we feared that it would stop progress. However, we went through the drainpipe to a wider portion which contained much limestone grit, hard fossil bodies left when the softer more soluble rock had been dissolved away. This marked the end



UBLEY HILL POT.
LOOKING UP 2" PITCH.
DON DOVASTON.



UBLEY HILL POT.
CLEARING THE TOP OF
FALL PITCH.
DON DOVASTON.



UBLEY HILL POT.
COMPLETE AND PARTIAL
SKULL.
DON SEARL.

of exploration in this direction. In the floor we had a view into a low passage with a small stream which would need digging. There was also a small gap on the right side at roof level blocked by mud.

Back in the chamber we started to look around. There was two possible digs on the same side some fifty feet apart. The roof at the other side of the chamber came down very low. I went in this direction because there appeared to be a short thick stalagmite. On getting closer it looked like a rock, so was passed by. Beyond was a small pool with water dripping from an aven above. Then Pete shouted that he had found a human skull. We all went over and found that it was the object that I had mistaken for a stalagmite. Next to this almost complete skull was a half skull, split from nose to basal region along the suture. This find started an intensive search for bones. A few feet away we found another skull.

The whole of this chamber appeared as a a charnal house with human bones, animal bones and antlers strewn haphazardly about. Below the second pitch we found another skull cap embedded in thin calcite.

The next day Mike Rennie started a survey which ended at the bottom of Bone Chamber. This gave us a length of 250ft and a depth of 100ft from the entrance. Digging was also carried out on the second day at the lower

point of the chamber. Here large amounts of rock collapsed with a deafening roar into a deep hole to half fill it and obstruct the way into two small passages that Tony Knibbs had previously observed leading off at the bottom. The collapse formed a sort of alcove. From a long way above was a small fall of water. The rock which had collapsed was part of the bedrock that had been dissolved away and undercut.

AN AMUSING INCIDENT

On our return home that week-end we decided to inform the press. As a result small paragraphs appeared in some of the daily and evening papers. B.B.C. Television were also informed and when the woman the other end who was receiving the message was told of the bones, her only comment was "how horrible". It seemed that the B.B.C. was more interested in sensational crime than in important archaeological discoveries.

The discovery was made at the time of the Bristol taxi murder. Our current secretary, Richard Woollicott, who knew nothing of the activities in London, was making a journey from Bristol to Blagdon by bus when a police car drew in front. The sergeant boarded the bus and asked for the secretary by name. Richard went with the police without putting up any resistance.

Apparently the B.B.C. had asked the police about the bones to check if it was a hoax. The police knew nothing and so had asked at Charterhouse where they might find the club secretary. The police have since asked

that they be informed of the discovery of any human remains of what ever age.

The week-end following the discovery Dr. Tratman went down to confirm that the human remains were very old. Photographs were taken and an attempt was made to get into the passages under the collapse of rock. This was unsuccessful owing to the size of the boulders.

After the others had departed Simon Knight induced me to help him dig out the tunnel leading from the top of the mud slope by the second pitch. While digging we came across rotten wood and what appeared to be rotten rope. After about an hour Simon was able to wriggle through into a high rift. The passage was relatively clean but lacked formations. At the end we found a small cavern which I followed down to a tight squeeze. The far side was a pitch, the top of the small waterfall we had found earlier. This extension added about 100ft to the length of the pit, making it between 350 and 400ft in length.

The points now left for possible extensions are the bottom of the waterfall and the lowest passage in the cave.

At present one of the skulls from Bone Chamber is in the British Museum for Carbon 14 dating. When we know the results then arrangements for securing the entrance from collapse will have to be made. We do not as yet know whether a lock will be required.

A short time ago I was fortunate enough to see Gerald Platten and his Mendip Notes. He had the Ubley Hill shake hole marked with a note to the effect that it had subsided 10 feet up to 1949. The hole must have developed quickly in recent years.