

Marshalls
Bleadon Quarry
18/05/14

To whom it may concern.

I am writing on behalf of the Axbridge Caving Club to bring to your attention the extensive stream caves which lie below the quarry floor in Bleadon Quarry. As the site is shortly to change its use, we feel it will be necessary to explore and survey these caves. There are likely to be some safety concerns regarding any new buildings or construction, both structural and possible pollution of the water course.

Introduction:

From old accounts and newspaper articles dating from the middle to late 19th century, it is understood that a large part flooded cave system lies just below the quarry floor at Bleadon. This has resulted in collapses and flooding in the past. A number of Pleistocene mammal bones were also uncovered and are extant in Taunton museum.

The nature and contents of the caves were written about in the local newspapers (such as the Weston Mercury) and certain archaeological proceedings, magazines and books. See the enclosed references of these, which are in chronological order.

At first, quarrying intersected a cave or cave containing very ancient (Pleistocene-last ice age) bones of wolf, bison etc. It caused excitement amongst the early archaeologists of the day and represented a bone cave similar to the caves at Uphill, Hutton, Bleadon Hill and Sandford Hill, also on the western Mendips.

It appears this upper section of the cave was quarried away but in subsequent years it is recorded that a roomy and stalactite covered cave passage led to a deep lake under the quarry floor. Candles were placed on a piece of wood and this 'raft' was floated into the lake. It slowly passed out of view down a stream passage leading southwards under the quarry. It was described as a smaller version of Wookey Hole.

The choked entrance to this cave lies (according to an old quarryman) in the overgrown and unused north embayment of the quarry and immediately adjacent to the old quarry face.

Another cave-now under the southern floor of the quarry (probably part of the same stream passage) was blocked with boulders.

This amount of water attracted the early town councils to suggest the water as a source for the supply for Highbridge, a town to the south, but the plan was eventually discarded as unworkable. This water now pours into the nearby River Axe.

However, a well was sunk behind the quarry offices (still extant) and struck water at 6m. The shaft had intersected a stream passage of the cave heading both north and south (according to a quarryman in 1911).

Safety Concerns for future use of the quarry

The shallow nature of the passages just below the quarry floor has led to a number of minor collapses in the past and it is also recorded that the southern part of the quarry flooded after a particularly heavy period of rain.

Without doubt there is an element of risk involved in any future construction work in the quarry as well as possible pollution of the water course to the River Axe

It is therefore essential to delineate and survey any open or flooded passage under the floor of the quarry.

Our proposal:

As the quarry is now in the process of changing its use, an opportunity has arisen to...

- 1) Dig out and explore and survey the cave passages under the quarry floor
- 2) Dive the well behind the offices to check the extent of the stream passages
- 3) Examine the nature of any remaining bone deposits
- 4) Explore the caves which are present in the quarry faces

Our expertise:

Over the last 50 years the cave diggers of the Axbridge Caving group have explored (often after protracted and difficult digging) numerous new caves and caverns at a number of places on the Mendip Hills. In our current group there is a wealth of knowledge and experience in the great many disciplines required for the whole process of opening and exploring these caves.

This includes the subjects of the law, safety and engineering, archaeology, geology, cave diving, laser surveying, rock blasting with explosives and the operation and use of heavy machinery.

Insurances:

Every one of us has full insurance which allows us to explore, dive or dig out, any cave, mine, well or any subterranean passage on any land where permission is given in the United Kingdom.

I enclose full schedule and details of our insurances.

Summary:

We would therefore like to liase with your company to open the choked cave entrance to the river cave, explore and survey any passage. Dive the well, and finally explore the holes currently exposed at two places in the quarry faces.

I look forward to your reply,

Reference Chronology

Notes on the caves:

- 1) A cavern with streamway is intersected by an entrance (upper part probably destroyed) in the old defunct quarry in the NE part of the site, it is blocked with rubble. The passage passes SW to be intersected by a well beside the quarry offices. This passage continues to the SW where the stream could be heard from another unexplored cave. This cave is now buried under the floor of the quarry.
- 2) A cavern or caverns broken into at a later date than 1 and probably part of the same system. Pleistocene bones recovered at possibly three different times.

Chronology:

1) **1854 Aug 12th Letter to the editor of the Weston-S-Mare Gazette**

‘Newly Discovered Cavern at Bleadon’

‘SIR-Various have been the conjectures relating to the newly discovered cavern in a stone quarry at Bleadon, as to its formation. Some simple and ignorant people assert that it is a work of art, fashioned by the hand of man, and which was made to serve as a retreat to the inhabitants against the fury of the Danes and Saxons, in that dreadful battle fought on Bleadon Hill in AD 495, between Cerdic and Alfred.

In giving a graphic description of this remarkable cavern. I trust that most of your readers will be fully convinced that this wonderful fissure must have been the sole production of nature and not of man. In the first place, then, you enter a hole formed in the rock, some eight feet high, by five feet wide, and about fifteen feet long, descending nearly ten feet from a level from the entrance; in this passage there is no particular beauty to attract the notice of its visitor except the irregularity of its rocky sides, and its hard incrustation. After reaching the end of this passage, you arrive at a large perpendicular cave, fourteen feet over [wide], which you descend by means of a ladder to the depth of nearly twenty feet, somewhat of a Gothic design; you traverse this cavern in a south and west direction until you come to a large body of pure water on each side, its abyss being quite unfathomable, and the end cannot, as yet, be ascertained, for if a lighted candle be fastened on a floating vessel, it will gradually draw off, until it is gone completely out of sight. When this cavern was first opened it was a beautiful and splendid sight to behold its various stalactites hanging from the roof formed by an accumulation of those little concretions in the drops of water, which, falling from the roof, have, by a long period of time, acquired the hardness of marble; those beautiful solid icicles, transparent as glass, have been broken and scattered in every direction by the rude hands of many of its visitors...’

Lympsham, Aug 2nd, 1854. B. Cox.

2) **1859 May 17th Weston-S-Mare Gazette**

‘Bleadon’

‘One of those cavernous holes, of which the mountain lime rock is so full, has been come upon in the course of working, in the Old Quarry here, belonging to the Rev. Mr Williams. There is a large deposit of water at one end, similar to Wookey Hole, near Wells; lights have been floated in, but the end has not been seen. There is some stalagmite matter, and altogether it is worthy a visit from the antiquary or geologist.’

3) **1878 Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society Proceedings 24. p 71.**

‘Bones of Wolf, Fox, Bear, Hare, Ox, and Deer, found in a fissure in the mountain limestone in a quarry at Bleadon, by the Rev. W. P. Williams’

4) 1881 April 23rd Weston Gazette

‘BONE CAVERN-One of those gruff holes or swallets in the limestone rock have been come upon lately in the old quarry at Bleadon belonging to the Rev. W. P. Williams, containing bones of extinct animals of this country. Mr Williams visited it this week, in company with Mr Bidgood, the curator of the museum at Taunton, with the bones of the bison, ox, reindeer, bear, wolf, fox and even of birds, were recognised. They were at the mouth of the cavern, which trends downwards into the hill, and may open into a large chamber containing more of such primitive treasures. Bones were found some time ago in this same quarry, which are now in the museum at Taunton, but none, so far, of the large carnivores such as lion, tiger, hyena etc.’

5) 1884 June 14th Weston Mercury

A Mr Young (quarry operator) said it had taken five men to pump out the water while sinking a well. Discussion with Mr Young regarding the sale of the spring and piece of land for the erection of an engine room and reservoir. Mr Merchant (chairman of the Burnham Local Board of Health) had ‘gone down a hole at Bleadon’ and found a quantity of water ‘rambling about the stones.’

6) 1885 Nov 14th Weston Mercury

Mr Newton reports on the ‘Bleadon Quarry Spring’. Mr Dare, a member of the Burnham Local Board of Health, had seen ...

‘The outlets into the River Axe, directly from Mr Young’s quarry and ‘a little well belonging to a cottage of Mr Young, the overflow of which also ran into the river.’ Mr Newton said that 4-5 thousand gallons a day is possible from the quarry spring. Well not yet sunk.

7) 1887 July 9th Weston-S-Mare Gazette

A Mr W. H. R. Bean of Weston allows visitors to see bones from a recently opened cave at Bleadon and belonging to the ‘pre-glacial period’.

8) 1895 Jan 19th Weston Mercury

Letter from Mr Young to Highbridge District Council concerning a well to be sunk.

9) 1898 July 2nd Weston Mercury

Mr Young had ‘opened a well’. It, at 10-11 feet, had to be pumped out by a steam pump. 12000 gallons per hour extracted.

10) 1898 Aug 6th Weston Mercury

Report of water at greater depth

11) 1898 Aug 20th Weston Mercury

Insufficient water to supply Highbridge.

12) 1898 Aug 27th Weston Mercury

Mr Young down 22ft (16 ft below road level). Young suggested casting around, not necessarily on his property, for another water supply. There were 5/6 wells at nearby cottages that were not diminished without rain. Search for the 'main spring' resulted in Mr Young, a Board official and a diviner picking up 'a line from the direction of the hill'. New well sunk to intercept this line. The old well was an old trial shaft cleared out to save expense.

13) 1898 Sept 17th Weston Mercury

New well being sunk.

14) 1898 Oct 27th Weston Mercury

Abandonment. Report on the Quarry springs. Test well: 27000 gallons/day. Two other test wells not yet completed. Well in Young's orchard 16000 gals/day. Third trial well south of the quarry-water rose up to flood the quarry and stop operations in winter. Powell says three wells at present open. 1. In the garden, 2. Old well opposite stable and 3. south side of the quarry. Second well (of the three) was the strongest.

15) 1901 WSM Museum

Collection of bones of brown bear, reindeer, wolf, *Bos Longifrons* and fox donated by G. C. Weare.

16) 1937 Balch. H. E. Mendip, Its Swallet Caves and Rock Shelters. P 137

'This cave has been quite quarried away, although traces of waterworn fissures are still visible. The Triassic beds come well up the flank of the hill, and are dipping fairly steeply to the south. The finds from Bleadon in Weston-super-Mare Museum include Brown Bear, Reindeer, Wolf, *Bos Longifrons*, and Fox-a late series, comparing with Gough's Cave at Cheddar-but without human remains. There are many half-concealed cavities and active waterways in the limestone quarries, and one was entered and followed a short distance some years ago. It is possible that considerable water may be available here'.

17) Mr Ron Goodman and Charles Young (former quarry manager) show Chris Richards in 1984...

A well (3346 5667). Cave passage blasted into at 16ft depth-water supply for the quarry plant. Cave ran NE to overgrown part of quarry and SW towards cottage on Bridge Road. Slow moving water in cave.

In SW corner of quarry (33445658) Cave with sound of flowing water, now buried under quarry floor.

In overgrown part of quarry at NE corner, Site of the water cavern. Boulders thrown into entrance in 1919 by a William Young. Some phreatic alcoves in nearby quarry face beside old pigsty. (3419 5675)