

A brief history of Gwaenysgor Cave

near Prestatyn

**containing human remains and bones of
Hyena, Bear and Woolly Rhinoceros**



Dr. J. Wilfrid Jackson measuring a bear skull at Manchester Museum
Photo: Courtesy of Buxton Museum and Art Gallery

Location of Gwaenysgor Cave

GPS grid reference of Upper Cave entrance: SJ0802680421 (+/-14m)



Locations of the two entrances (viewed looking north-east)



Photo: John Blore

Entrance to the 'upper cave'



Harrison's shaft; the entrance to the now-filled 'lower cave'

Introductory notes

Discovered around 1885, Gwaenysgor Cave yielded the remains of many long-extinct Pleistocene animals, together with charcoal and human remains. Since excavation at the cave ceased in the 1930s, the cave has largely been forgotten. The writer has monitored the deteriorating condition of the cave since 1974. By re-examining the documentary sources and highlighting the cave and its history, this short paper attempts to restore the caves status as an important archaeological site.

Dr. J. Wilfrid Jackson (1880-1978) carried out excavations at the cave. He worked alongside Professor William Boyd Dawkins (1837-1929) at Manchester Museum, Jackson gaining the reputation of "*Britain's leading cave prehistorian from the 1920s to 1960*" (Bishop 1982). Boyd Dawkins had a great love of the Derbyshire Dales, and upon his death, bequeathed many of his documents to Buxton Museum. The collection was later established in a dedicated space, named the Boyd Dawkins Room. In time, the Wilfrid Jackson papers were added, and this room today is dedicated to the two men's collections. The museum however, has confirmed that no detailed reports on Gwaenysgor Cave exist in the collection, merely a list of bones he found in the cave (Jackson 1939). Following his excavations however, Jackson states clearly that Gwaenysgor Cave was used by Palaeolithic man and contained the remains of several now-extinct animals (Jackson 1931).

In the past, there has been considerable confusion amongst local archaeologists between Gwaenysgor Cave and the more well-known Gop Cave, which lies 700 metres to the south-east. This was compounded when they then created the fictitious name of 'Gop Farm Cave', presumably based upon an incomplete description of Gwaenysgor Cave as being an "*ossiferous cave on Gop Farm*" (Davies 1925). Consequently, several secondary sources now confuse the three names for these two cave sites. Care has therefore been taken below to exclude conflating sources.

Acknowledgements

The writer is grateful for assistance freely given by Flintshire Record Office, Mold Reference Library and staff at Manchester and Buxton Museums, particularly Buxton's specialist on the Dawkins and Jackson collections, Dr. Brian Goodwin. Final thanks are extended to the current landowners for their understanding and interest in the cave.

A Brief History of Gwaenysgor Cave

In a meadow between Gwaenysgor village and Gop Farm to the south, lies an interesting archaeological cave that was excavated on several occasions, revealing that the cave was used by animals thousands of years ago, at a period before the last ice age. It was also used by humans, possibly at the same time. The cave was formed many millions of years ago, from solution by acidic waters and erosion by stream action. Before the last glaciers covered the area, animals such as rhinoceros, hippopotamus and elephant roamed the land. They were hunted by humans, using caves as shelters or more rarely, as places of habitation. Hyenas also used caves as dens, leaving the bones of the animals they consumed on the cave floors. The arrival of the last ice age changed the surface landscape significantly, and in the process, sealed off the entrances to most caves, filling them with glacial drift or 'debris-flow' material. Gwaenysgor Cave was a typical example and remained sealed off from the world of the surface for twelve thousand years.

In about 1885, lead mining Captain George Harrison discovered the cave whilst searching for a vein of lead ore "*He struck upon a broad vein of white calcite spar. This he followed down for seven or eight feet, when one corner of his shaft fell in*" (Goold 1913). "*Descending, Harrison found himself in a large rocky cavity from the roof of which hung stalactites of lengths up to 2 feet or more*" (Goold 1926). Many bones littered the floor. He named this the 'Lower Cave'.

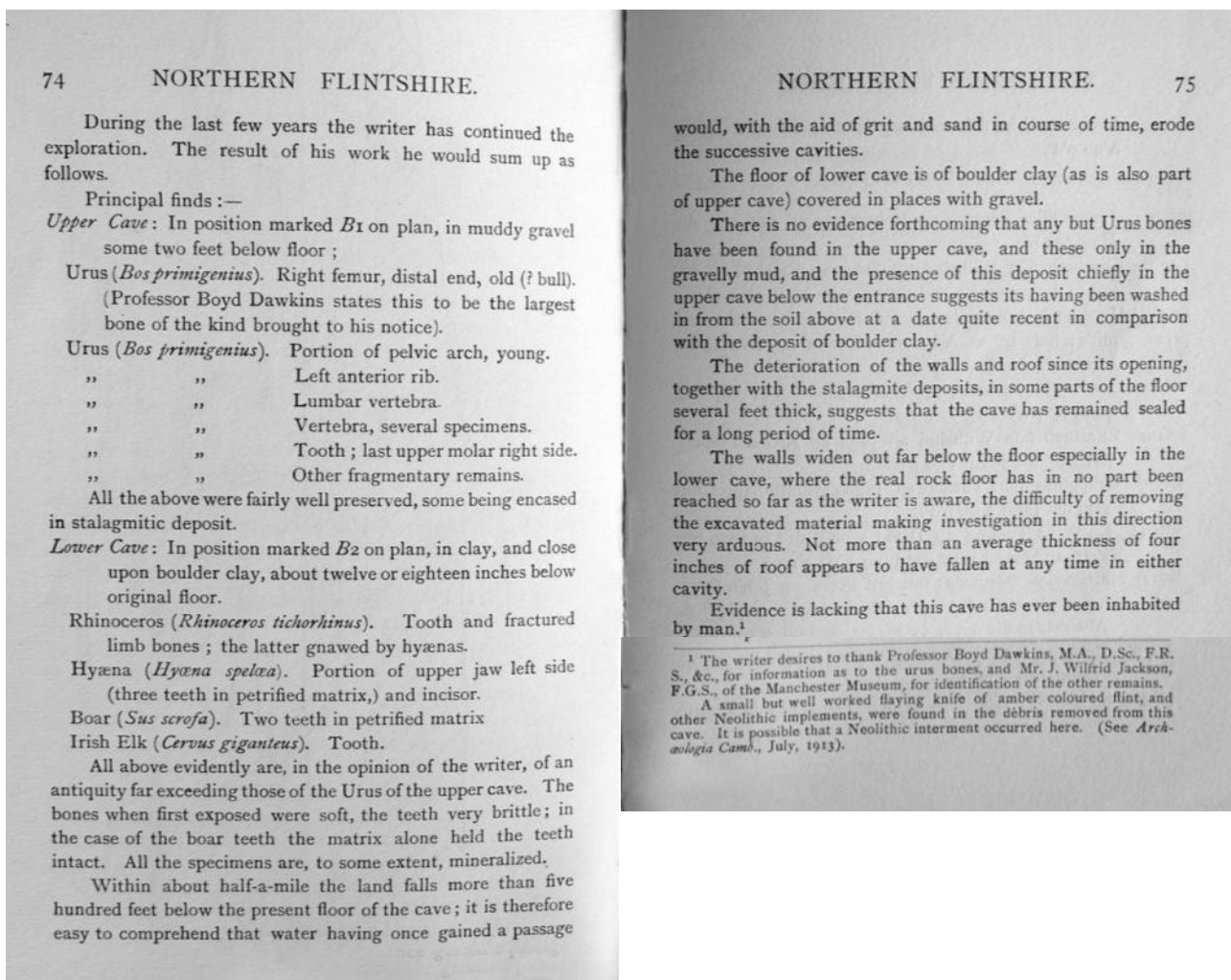
Note: An 1881 underground survey of the nearby Gop Mines by George Harrison can be seen at Flintshire Record office (Ref: D/HM/21).

Whilst exploring the chamber, Harrison spotted a crawl under the east wall which adjoined the foot of an ascending 'pothole'. He climbed up the pothole for 12 feet to enter a crawling-sized passage running north. This, after about 30 feet, opened into a second, larger chamber he called the 'Upper Cave'. At its southern end this chamber rose to a point very close to the surface. Harrison therefore excavated upwards to create a second entrance. He then installed heavy timbers within the cave as supports in his search for lead, but was unsuccessful and abandoned the cave. By previous agreement with Lord Mostyn's agent, Harrison was obliged to fill in the original entrance.

The new second entrance was initially concealed with "*a heap of stones and soil*" and Harrison kept the location secret except from "*one or two personal friends*". A few years later, shortly before his death, he "*gave particulars of the cave and its entrance to a labourer acquaintance (Henry Hughes), who in collaboration with a fellow villager, opened the cave as an attraction for summer visitors*" (Goold 1913).

Between 1885 and 1910, several excavations took place at the cave, although no details exist of who carried out this work or what they discovered, but "Some bushels of bones are said to have been removed from the floor directly beneath the pothole" (Goold 1926): A bushel being 1.28cu. ft.. One man only is named as an excavator during this period: "Mr Charlton Jones of Deganwy (late of New York), did a considerable amount of work in the cave, and it is unfortunate that a record of his exploration is not, up to the present time, forthcoming" (Goold 1913).

Gwaenysgor Cave was first excavated more systematically in 1911 by H.V. Goold, who found bones of great Irish deer, ox, bear, hyena and Arctic lemming (Goold 1913). "The first record of lemming in Wales" (Neaverson 1942). The remains of this animal and other finds from the cave were presumably kept at Manchester Museum, Jackson listing them in a letter to the National Museum at Cardiff (Jackson 1939).



List of animal finds excavated between 1911 and 1913 (Goold 1913)
Human remains were first found in 1929 by Jackson

The nearby Gop Cave, lying in the shadow of Gop Cairn produced many human and animal bones which in 1913, were stored "*in the columbarium*" and "*pigeon-house*" at Gop Farm. "*In 1913 Mr. Glenn obtained permission..... to remove anything archaeological remaining in the building, but before this could be done, the tenant..... threw the contents of the pigeon-house down an open mine shaft nearby*" (Davies 1946). It has been suggested that the finds from Gop Farm, were thrown down Harrison's Entrance (Hankinson & Silvester 2009). If so, this could lessen the importance of Gwaenysgor Cave. Documentary sources however, show that ancient remains and charcoal (indicative of human use) were found in areas not associated with the debris filling Harrison's shaft. Furthermore, it was common archaeological practice, even then, to mark important bones with identifiable reference numbers using Indian ink. It is therefore most unlikely that the bones found in Harrison's shaft of bison, reindeer, human and Arctic lemming (Jackson 1929), would not have been marked in this manner if they had originated from Gop Farm. A final point is that if the discovery of arctic lemming was the first of this animal to be documented in Wales, it could not have come from the nearby Gop Cave.

In 1914 the Upper Cave was visited by Ellis Davies who described the entrance as being: "*.....a covered passage built of stone and timber, then in a dangerous condition, led down to the cave. Shortly afterwards the masonry fell in, blocking the entrance, and in that state it remains*" (Davies 1925).

The upper cave once had a stone 'igloo' constructed over its entrance. A photograph of this in 1920 can be seen on-line at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/81944984@N02/8020040900/>

Describing his first excavations at the cave, Jackson states: "*Two unworked flakes of flint were also found inside the cave (as distinct from remains he found in the re-excavated debris filling Harrison's shaft), as well as charcoal*" (Jackson 1929). He also proposed that a third unexcavated entrance (obscured by glacial till) lies at the southern end of the 'lower cave', where the word 'loam' is indicated on the second survey on page 7. Goold's 1913 survey shows timbers stabilising the route south from the bottom of Harrison's shaft. When examined by the writer in 1974, the timbers had collapsed. No modern-day examination of this area has therefore been carried out and it's archaeological potential remains unknown.

In 1931 Jackson stated that he excavated at the cave assisted by Professor Boswell of Liverpool University and Mr. E. Montag, F.G.S....

"Last year I came over and spent about ten days in reconstructing the stairway down which you have just been. We had to clear out old timbers and bring in new ones and make this entrance. We did a certain amount of digging here and there. Last year I also put in this shaft and re-excavated Harrison's old shaft and put in there a trap door.

Three weeks ago I was here, in all, for a fortnight, and put in a good deal of work in the lower cave, more especially at the foot of the shaft, and explored in various directions. We found a certain number of bones as well as other objects.

The hyaena took advantage of this cave, and made of it a den. He was responsible for bringing in the bones of the bigger animals; these bigger animals did not inhabit the cave themselves. Palaeolithic man also took advantage of this cave; he had not the opportunities of his successors and was not able to build a house for himself. He was the hunter of wild animals, and used the cave for habitation" (Jackson 1931). This seems to have been the last excavation work carried out at the cave.

In the 1960s Welsh Water were regrettably granted consent to use the lower cave as an overflow for their nearby sewage treatment plant. A pipe was laid discharging directly into the cave, a steel ladder was installed in Harrison's shaft, and a new cast-iron grid was set into a concrete capping over the shaft. Around the same time, a flood drain from the road was also laid to the upper cave. Although local archaeological bodies were informed of the problem on several occasions, no action was taken, and the discharge of untreated sewage continued, albeit on an intermittent basis, for the next forty years. In 1974, sewage solids blocked only the lowest portion of the lower cave. In 1986 about half of the lower cave had been lost, sealing off the crawl to the 'pothole' leading to the upper cave. By 2013 the entire lower cave had been filled (Ebbs, C. Personal diaries).

The upper cave remains uncontaminated and can still be entered today with landowners prior consent. There is a need however, to clear and improve access, as earth and debris from the surface has been migrating down into the cave for many years. It is not known what if any, unexcavated deposits remain. A future project to remove debris and assess the caves potential should certainly be worthy of consideration.

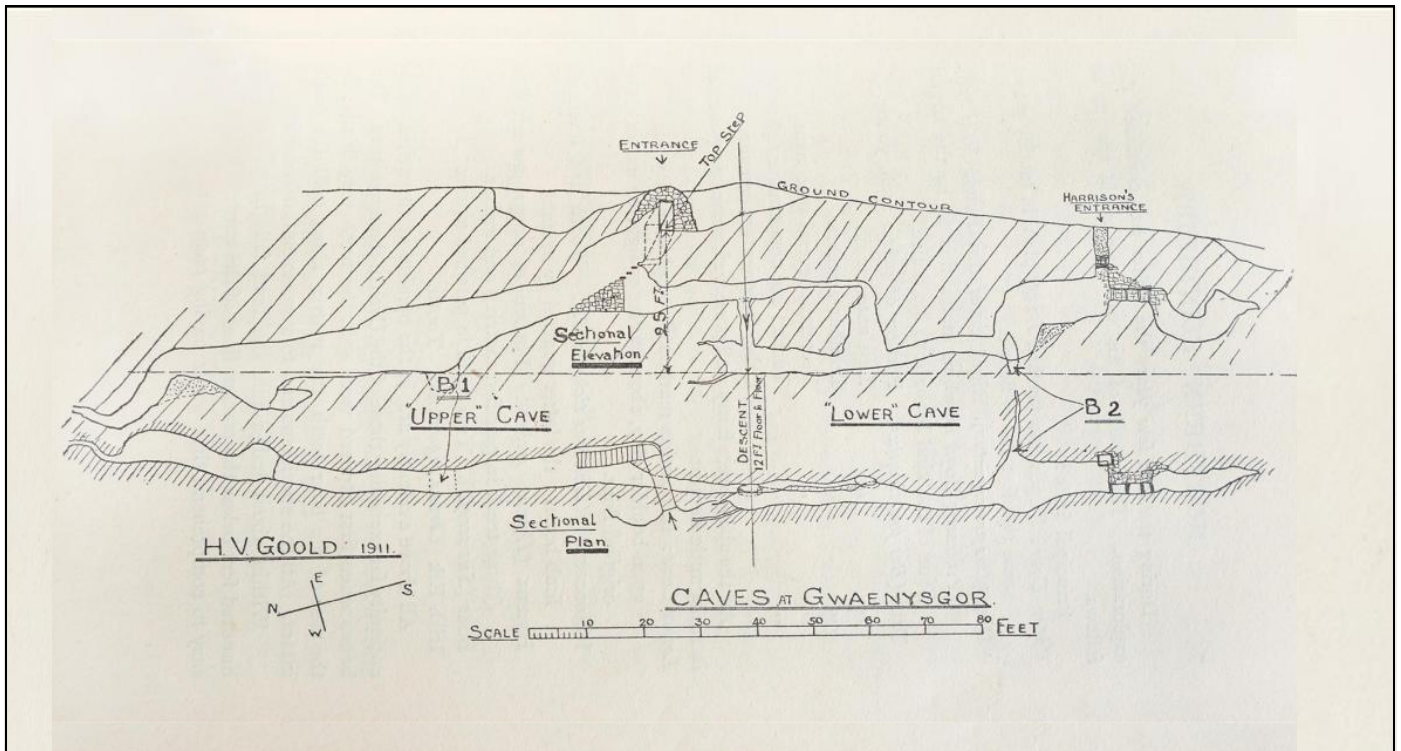
Cris Ebbs January 1st 2015



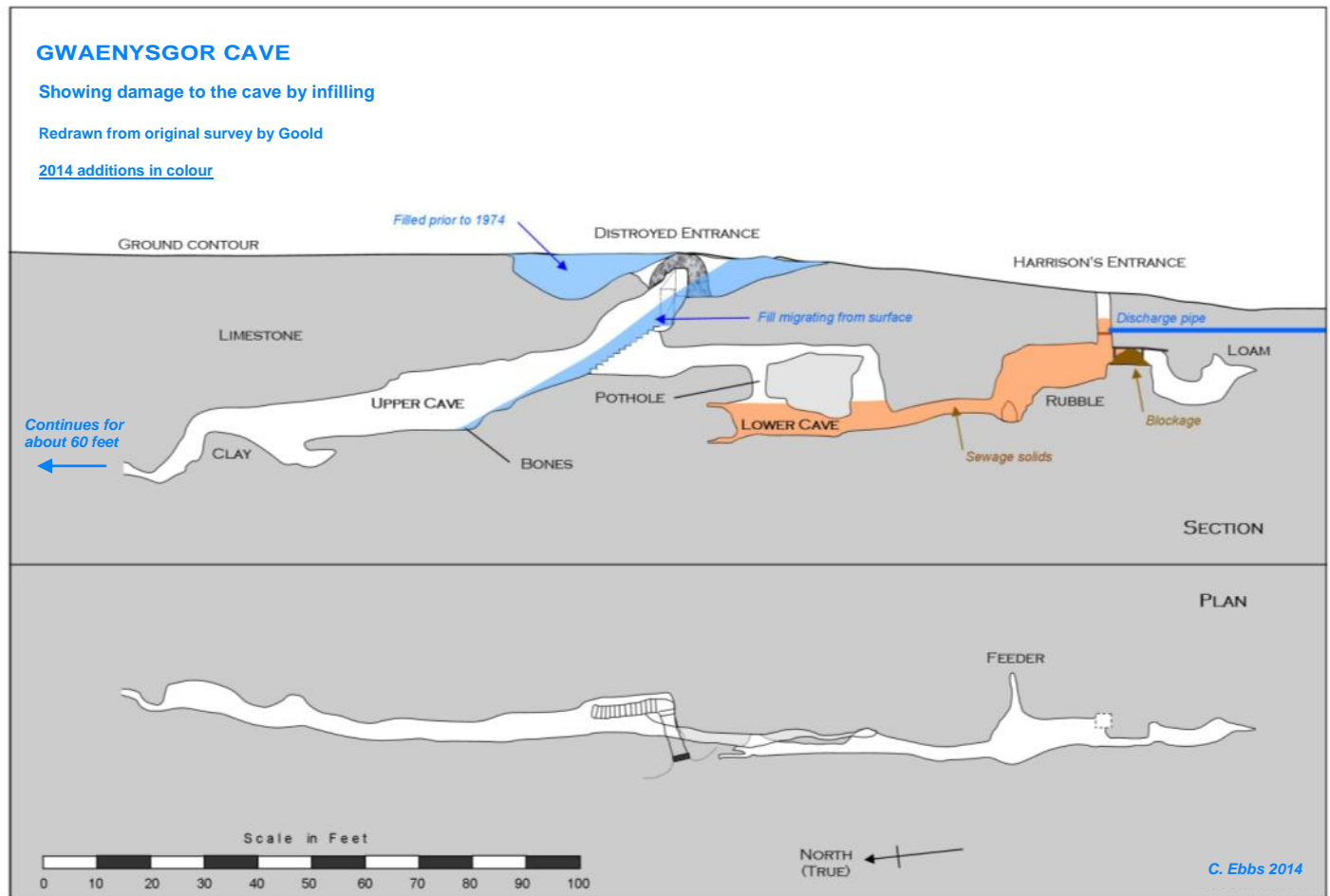
Modern-day view of entrance from within the Upper Cave
Photo: Ian Adams



Harrison's Shaft in 2014 - Note the fill level at a depth of 2 metres below the surface



Source: Goold 1913





Wilfrid Jackson (far left) with digging team at Craig Lwyd, near Penmaenmawr 1920
Courtesy of Buxton Museum and Art Gallery



Wilfrid Jackson (far left) and team, during excavations at Park Cave, Ballintoy, northern Ireland in 1933
Source: "*The Cave Hunters*" edited by M.J. Bishop, Derbyshire Museum Service 1982.

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