

Archaeological cave conservation in North Wales - A (belated) way forward?

The condition of archaeological caves in North Wales has been slowly deteriorating for many decades, during which, some have been lost or destroyed. Professional archaeologists nationally have acted with what one report described in 1986 as 'benign neglect'. Despite most areas of the UK addressing this deterioration, archaeologists in North Wales have tended to ignore archaeological caves for four decades. They have also responded poorly when informed of archaeological caves under threat. As they have consistently been unwilling to engage with the caving community, they have been wholly unaware of the many new cave discoveries with archaeological potential. Consequently, the volume (or stock) of known archaeological deposits has been allowed to diminish.

It should not be this way: Several published reports have in the past examined archaeological caves and offered recommendations intended to improve matters. It is therefore regrettable that many years later, few of these recommendations have been applied to the caves of North Wales.

A few key points from just a couple of past reports are presented below, as they remain pertinent to caves today. They also serve to remind archaeologists that the subject has already been considered, and that ignoring such suggestions any longer should not be an option, unless of course, more effective solutions can be found.

Source 1: "A Survey of English and Welsh Palaeolithic Cave Sites" (1986) by Barton & Collcutt.

Commissioned by Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission and Cadw. The report was never published but a copy is held by Cadw. It is a good report and pulls no punches, particularly in its criticism of professional archaeologists. But although its remit was to consider known or possible Palaeolithic caves, it made no mention of (the probably Palaeolithic) Gwaenysgor Cave, which has since been avoidably destroyed.

Key comments or recommendations include:

Inevitable degradation

"Any SAM (scheduled ancient monument) or group of SAMs will constantly degrade through natural processes; the better the conservation, the more slowly the SAM will degrade, but degrade it inevitably will (page xxiv).

Crisis of the dwindling stock of cave deposits

In failing to identify new deposits to increase the resource stock *"The impression of crisis is inescapable"* (page xviii).

"Existing SAMs will be gradually 'used up' and must be constantly replaced" (page xxiv).

"External funding bodies should be encouraged to finance professional cave prospection programmes" (page xxix).

"New sites would gradually be added to the stock not only through prospection but also through assessment of some known sites" (page xxviii).

"We see no reason whatsoever to suggest that the stock of potential Palaeolithic caves and shelters is anywhere near exhausted" (page xxvii).

The need for research

"Conservation is sterile without research" (page xxiv).

Scheduling ineffective

"Those cave sites which have been scheduled in the past generally survive in no better condition than those which have not" (page xxi).

On-site signage

"Cadw should consider a future policy for raising public awareness concerning Palaeolithic caves. The concept of empty caves as 'sites of historical importance', with information plaques, might be one possible approach" (page xxix).

Better inspection

"Overall, we could find no evidence that Palaeolithic cave SAMs are being regularly visited by Inspectors or regional archaeological officers with experience in this field" (page x).

Caver antagonism unwarranted

"In respect to amateur digging, it must be stressed that there is not a priori justification for antagonism towards cavers. In the past, very useful contributions have been made to Palaeolithic cave archaeology by persons who started out as conscientious amateurs. Also, the caving community includes a number of professional archaeologists, who have spearheaded the recent push for cave conservation. The larger caving organisations have been responsible for collecting much of the data which has led to SSSI listing.....of caves all over the country" (page xix).

"It is clear that the only hope for a real long-term solution to this problem (amateur digging) lies in a thorough programme of public education The obvious place to start is with the established caving groups" (page xx).

Cavers as a controlled asset

"Specially tailored approaches to caving organisations..... would help to begin the conversion of amateur involvement to a controlled asset" (page xxvii).

Source 2: A '**Protocol Report**' and a '**Management Report**' form two parts of '**A Conservation Audit of Archaeological Cave Resources in the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales**' (2006) by the University of Sheffield. Compiled by Holderness, Davies, Chamberlain and Donahue.

Their key comments or recommendations include:

Scheduling ineffective

"In many cases scheduling as an isolated conservation measure is probably ineffective when applied to an archaeological cave in the absence of an active management strategy" (Protocol report, page 12).

Benign neglect

"The management of caves within the National Parks has generally been one of benign neglect" (page 13).
"..... curatorial responses to archaeological discoveries in caves tend to be reactive to the occurrence of new, unexpected and vulnerable finds, rather than being based on a prior, well-founded characterisation of the existing cave archaeological resource" (Management report, page 2).

Strategies needed

"In contrast to the speleological and nature conservation communities, British archaeologists have shown less awareness of the extent and significance of the cave archaeological resource, and there is a need to develop effective procedures for characterising the resource, to identify and understand threats to its integrity, and to formulate strategies that will help to conserve archaeological caves for future study" (Management report, page 1).

Education and leaflets

"Educational and outreach programmes can be effective mechanisms for informing the public about the archaeological and palaeological importance of caves and in appraising landowners and visitors to caves of the kinds of activities that may result in damage to archaeological structures and deposits. Information dissemination is most effective when targeted towards landowners and tenants, public bodies and

participants in out-door recreational activities. Short information guides can be created that highlight the nature of archaeological deposits in caves, as well as indicating the processes and activities that can damage these deposits, and that include recommendations for good management practice as well as contact information for reporting damage or to obtain advice" (Protocol report, page 11).

"The simplest way of educating the general public is through information boards located at or near appropriate sites, and through the distribution of information leaflets at central locations in the National Parks, for example, at tourist information centres. Public lectures about archaeological caves would provide a further opportunity to disseminate knowledge and communicate good management practice" (Management report, page 20).

Add C14 dates to HER

"Radiocarbon dates constitute an important category of archaeological information that is not systematically appended to historic environment records" (Protocol report, page 5).

This report also emphasises advantages of involving the caving community.....

a) "The Adopt-a-Cave" scheme promoted by the popular caving magazine 'Descent' has been successful in reducing levels of rubbish, graffiti and other hazards to cave structures. This scheme already covers several archaeological caves that are regularly accessed by cavers, and could easily be extended to additional archaeological caves perhaps by involving local archaeological societies and natural history groups as well as local cavers. Some financial support might be required, and occasional assistance from archaeologists might be needed, but this is viewed as an effective way both to enhance the protection of the caves and to promote a dialogue between cavers and archaeologists" (Management report, page 23).

b) "The development of a cooperative approach involving heritage managers, scientific interest groups and recreational caving organisations is becoming increasingly important in cave conservation at a regional level. An example of this kind of approach is the Derbyshire Caving Association Underground Conservation Forum, which hosts regular liaison meetings between cavers, mines historians, speleologists and regional historic and natural environment resource managers" (Management report, page 18).

"The Nature Conservancy Council (now Natural Resources Wales) ".....appreciated the value of working closely with landowners and representatives of caving organisations in the formulation of cave conservation plans" (Management report, page 16).

c) Regarding the caving community, a key recommendation was "to draw up guides to best practice in cave exploration, and to disseminate the information by leaflet, through meetings with representatives of caving clubs, and through publication in caving journals. By emphasising to cavers that archaeologists do not wish to simply exclude all access to caves, it may be possible to stimulate co-operation between recreational cavers and curators of the historic environment" (Management report, page 20).

d) "Any cleaning, stabilisation and protection work will require consultation with wildlife conservation agencies and with representatives of the recreational caving community" (Protocol report, page 11). Caving organisations already have such guides to best practice in cave exploration that include archaeology.

It is interesting that both reports state the need for:

- Co-operation between cavers and archaeologists.
- Signage and education.
- More effective means of protection than scheduling alone.

Final words concerning Irish archaeological caves, which are also applicable to those of North Wales, come from "**The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland**" (2015) by Marion Dowd:

"The majority of significant archaeological finds made in caves in recent decades can be credited to cavers..... essentially, cavers venture into territory that few archaeologists are comfortable or suitably trained to explore with confidence" (pages 44, 45).

"..... of the 16 caves that were excavated to modern archaeological standards over the past 30 years, 37% produced no archaeological material" (page 78). Hence if anywhere near 63% of North Wales caves contain archaeology, it is surprising that no major project is planned to examine all new and un-assessed caves.

"The re-excavation of sites that were investigated prior to 1950, as well as targeted excavation of hitherto un-investigated caves, will undoubtedly prove rewarding..... detailed zooarchaeological analysis of the faunal

remains from caves, incorporating a comprehensive radiocarbon dating programme, is the largest outstanding piece of work related to Irish cave archaeology" (page 262).

It should be noted that in 2015, CPAT carried out test excavations at four cave sites. Whilst this is a promising start, there still appears to be no long-term plan for the assessment and protection of North Wales caves into the future, nor any proper policy in place detailing an effective response when notified of caves under threat. A major obstacle for past North Wales archaeologists has been their unfortunate and counter-productive attitude towards the amateur sector, which does not exist in other areas. Until this is eradicated, effective change may be slow in coming.

Cris Ebbs
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