

SCRAGG'S HOLE, COMPTON BISHOP, SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

An account is given of the discovery and excavation of this small cave in the 1940s. William (Willie) Iredale Stanton's (WIS) caving diaries, excavation notes and archaeological finds are curated in the Wells and Mendip Museum. Field visits to the museum and Scragg's Hole were undertaken to better understand its archaeological significance, topography and stratigraphy. Whilst the excavation and written reports are remarkable for someone aged 13 years the archaeological excavation methods fall a long way short of what is expected today. In his notes WIS informs us that at the beginning of the excavation he and his fellow students were excavating soil at interval depths of six inches and documenting this accordingly. However, for some reason not explained, they later started excavating and recording at a depth of every 12 inches. This presumably was to reach the lower levels of the cave and the Roman floor level sooner. It may be that in their youthful exuberance they missed possible post Roman to Medieval levels, although some artefacts from this period are mentioned in his excavation record. The bones that were excavated were not all kept. In addition, the site was exposed, well known in the local area and therefore subject to site contamination. WIS notes that they frequently lost equipment due to theft and that the site was subject to other acts of mischief.

INTRODUCTION

Scragg's Hole (NGR ST 39637 54960) is one of a series of small caves at around 50 m OD in a Carboniferous Limestone ridge in the parish of Compton Bishop (Historic England MN 1588246). The Mendip Cave Registry and Archive (MCRA) records that it is close to two cottages on the Cross to Loxton road and other sites nearby include Fox's Hole, Denny's Hole, Sandy Cave, Picken's Hole, and other more minor sites (Figure 1).

H.E. Balch, then curator of Wells Museum and President of the Wessex Cave Club, and with interests in archaeology, natural history, geology and caving gave lectures to the scholars at Sidcot School and encouraged the activities of the young Willie Stanton and his fellow pupils. Balch (1937, 1948) knew that John Stark, who occupied a cottage on the edge of the common and thoroughly knew the area, had identified a promising foxhole approximately 100 ft up the hillside and nearer his cottage than Denny's Hole which he named from memory as Scragg's Hole. It had no passable entrance but offered potential for excavation. Balch (1948, 132) theorised that the great chamber of Denny's Hole, or the smaller Scragg's Hole chamber may have been formed by an important swallet stream within a different, much earlier, geographical landscape.

Willie Stanton had started cave exploration in 1941 while a pupil at Sidcot School Balch encouraged Stanton and his fellow Sidcot School pupils to excavate the site from 1943 to 1949 extracting much archaeological material. After two years of excavating deep floor debris they revealed definite evidence of late Romano-British occupation. The finds from this work are in Wells and Mendip Museum and Stanton's own account is given below.

Later excavation was carried out at the site by Sidcot School cavers in 1953 and apparently also by members of the Axbridge Caving and Archaeological Group in 1951 and in 1961. No published accounts of these digs are known and save for the accounts in the Sidcot School Speleological Society (SSSS) logbooks no other records are known to exist. Enquires with the Axbridge Group and at Axbridge Museum have proved fruitless. The SSSS logs include two

plans and elevations drawn by R. Wooley and R.D Halford showing the progress of their excavations. The whereabouts of their finds, if any, are not known.

Stanton wrote in his *Caving Diary Volume II* that he exhibited finds from Scragg's Hole in the June 1945 G.M. exhibition - receiving a special prize of 2 guineas (£2.2s.0d) and also won the 1st prize of 7s.6d for his essay 'The Story of Mendip'; making total prize money of £2.9s.6d. He further noted that he was required to write an account (about 3 ½ pages) of Wolf Den (another cave near Compton Bishop) and Scragg's Hole for the 2nd edition of Mr Balch's 'The Mendip Caves' (Balch, 1948). This 1948 account is hitherto the only published account of this cave. Furthermore, the site has sometimes been confused with Picken's Hole in literature, and the two have been conflated in the Somerset Historic Environmental Record, where site 10459 is described as "Picken's Hole (Scragg's Hole)" and gives references to digs at both of these caves. Strangely, that record also gives two slightly different grid references (see page 240, this volume). This report attempts to document what is known of the Scragg's Hole excavation and of the excavation finds.

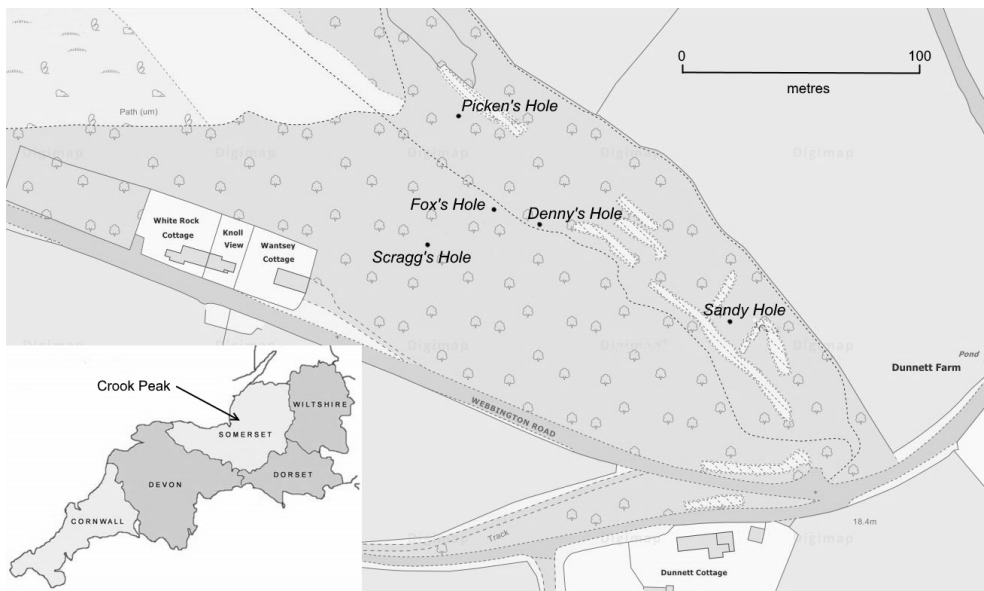


Figure 1. Cave locations on Crook Peak, Compton Bishop, Somerset.

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THE 1943—1949 EXCAVATION

Stanton produced abundant handwritten, meticulously detailed documents and his 2009 typewritten explanatory notes regarding the Scragg's Hole Collection and Excavation Record can be found with the archaeological material held at Wells and Mendip Museum. It is reproduced below:

Scragg's Hole (ST 3964 5496) at Compton Bishop is a south-facing cave shelter low down on the rocky ridge that descends southeastward from Crooks Peak to the road near Dunnett Farm. It is about 30 metres west-southwest of the entrance to Denny's Hole. During the first excavation in the 1940s the ridge was grass-covered, with scattered bramble thickets, and the cave was perfectly accessible. In 2005 there was hardly any grass and the cave was unreachable in a dense growth of brambles, briar rose, blackthorn, hawthorn etc. Ash trees were springing up and by 2030 the cave should be easily located in woodland.

My interest in the cave was sparked by a sentence in Mendip, its Swallet Caves and Rock Shelters, page 140, by H E Balch. 'It has no passable entrance, but as the foxes habitually use it, there is no doubt it would be worth digging'. I, as a 12 year old Sidcot schoolboy, discussed the possibility of a dig with Mr Balch at his Saturday excavation sessions at Badger Hole, and received his blessing. He would identify any finds. He emphasised how important it was to keep a careful record of the work.

I and a few friends worked at the cave at intervals until a year after I left school, cycling the 2 miles from Sidcot. The dig began on February 14 1943 and ended, as far as I was concerned, on September 1949. Every 2 or 3 weeks in the early days I would cycle over to Badger Hole on a Saturday afternoon for Mr Balch to identify bones, pottery etc. In retrospect it seems likely that some of the identifications, especially of bones, were too confident, although some bones, such as hedgehog lower jaws, were unmistakable.

Initially the site was a small overhanging cliff in patchily dolomitised limestone, but an inner chamber was soon entered. The spoil, usually consisting of brown stony mud, removed in bucketfuls, was searched on a smooth flat pieced of ground and was then dumped on a tip in the gully a few yards further east (sketch on page 1 of the record). Later I sieved it, then constructed a wood and wire tilting sifter like the one at Badger Hole. Mostly the deposit was too sticky for this to be effective. Misses Popham, at the nearest cottage, kindly allowed me to store digging tools in their shed.

The deposit was excavated in foot layers, with each day's extension marked and numbered on a master plan in the record. It looked as though the whole deposit had been turned over by burrowing animals, whose tunnels were still encountered here and there. Romano-British artefacts and later material, medieval to recent, were discovered at all levels above the rock floor (in the inner cave) and the barren sandy stratum (further out). When this became evident I removed the remaining Romano-British material as a single layer. Artefacts were almost common near the base, including two undisturbed small hearths of wood ash. Large limestone boulders were strewn about at this level.

Below the Romano-British deposit, at 6 to 7 feet depth at the cave entrance, is a completely different deposit of sharp angular stones with the spaces between them filled with yellowish sandy material, all apparently the breakdown product of the local partly dolomitised limestone. A similar deposit forms the floor of Supra-Sandy Hole not far away on the east side of the ridge. The top few inches below the

Romano-British layer are hard and compressed, suggesting a floor, below which it is loose with air spaces. The deposit is barren of organic remains; nor is there any brown soil like that of the overlying layer.

It would appear that the lower deposit formed as a thermoclastic scree when the cave was isolated from the ground overhead, with a thin rock roof. Then, perhaps during the 4th century AD (evidence of the Magnentius coin, 350-354 AD), the roof collapsed and the cave was at once used for occupation. There are remains of an opposing cave wall, continuing round to the gully, among the 'High Bushes' on the sketch on page 1 of the record. The cave deposits are likely, therefore, to continue into the unexcavated external area.

I understand that small-scale excavations were carried out in 1953 by Sidcot School cavers and by Axbridge Caving Group in 1951 and 1961, and Romano-British artefacts found. I do not know if records exist.

As regards the Romano-British occupation, it was sufficiently prolonged for at least 40 different pots and dishes to be broken and their fragments, only a few in each case, to be recognised. Some were black handmade ware, with complicated decorations, others, turned on the wheel, were both grey and black, with simple decorations such as open cross-hatching. A few small pieces of fine red ware were thought to be 'false Samian'. Cooking soot was still present on a few pots. In no cases was more than half an individual pot recovered. Presumably, if a pot was broken in the cave, the fragments would be thrown away, in which case they may be concentrated under the opposing cave wall mentioned above. A few pieces of pale greyish pottery with a greenish glaze were found and thought to be medieval.

Miscellaneous items of interest include the bone pins, the bone 'graver', the fragment of bone comb, the oyster, limpet and mussel shells, the second brass coin of Magnentius (350-354 AD), the broken hone stone, many pieces of a delicate glass 'vase', part of a shale spindle whorl, a small smooth round quartzitic pebble, two flint 'scrapers', and some heavily corroded iron nails and rings, which may be post-Roman. The bones were numerous, mostly of domestic animals of all ages to recent, many of the larger ones burnt and split lengthwise, presumably for the marrow. Only a sample selection was kept. More recent items, such as the medieval pottery, the 12th century silver halfpenny, the broken china and the many small pieces of roofing slate, raise the question of why they should have been brought to the site at all.

The extensive threshold area remains unexcavated and is likely to contain many more relics of the occupation.

Dr W.I. Stanton. March 2009

FINDS HELD AT WELLS AND MENDIP MUSEUM

Despite the short comings in the excavation procedure the standard of recording and drawing is commendably high. The finds held in the Museum have been catalogued and the catalogue is available in the supplemental material (*vide infra*). Here we present a sample of those finds. Some mentioned in the excavation note book were missing or not recognisable. This was especially noticeable with regard to the pot sherds, where past attempts had been made to glue them together.

With the possible exception of the flint, see below, all the finds could be attributed to Roman or post-Roman occupation. Stanton noted (*vide supra*) that “Romano-British artefacts and later material, medieval to recent, were discovered at all levels above the rock floor (in the inner cave) and the barren sandy stratum (further out). This is the basis of his conclusion that the site had been inaccessible prior to the Roman period.

A photograph (Figure 2) of a selection of the glass fragments was sent to Dr. Ian Powlesland (University of Bristol) who commented, subject to actually seeing the glass, that “it is most likely to be forest or potash glass.” He also commented that “some forms of recycled soda glass can also be blue green in colour.” Both these types of glass were produced during the Roman period. This type of glass was imported into Britain from the Rhineland during the Roman to Anglo-Saxon period and then from the 13th century onward. It continued to be manufactured in Britain into the early post-medieval period up to the latter part of the 17th century when lead glass became more popular. The sherds indicate that it was a very fine glass vessel, such as a drinking glass or goblet. Dr. Powlesland further noted that all these forms were produced from the Roman until post-medieval periods (Powlesland, *I. pers. comm.*).

The collection includes one flint tool (Figure 3). This appears to have been fabricated from good quality, possibly mined, flint, though it appears to have been struck quite crudely, possibly hard-hammer struck, given the hinges visible. It is possibly a Later Neolithic Levallois scraper. Its presence would seem to imply a pre-Roman presence at the site, although it might easily have been found elsewhere and brought to the site as a keepsake. Stanton mentions making other finds of flint, mainly chips during the excavation, but no others were figured by him and none have been identified in the Museum's collection.



Figure 2. Selection of glass fragments from Scragg's Hole.

Photo: A. Summerfield and W. Russ.

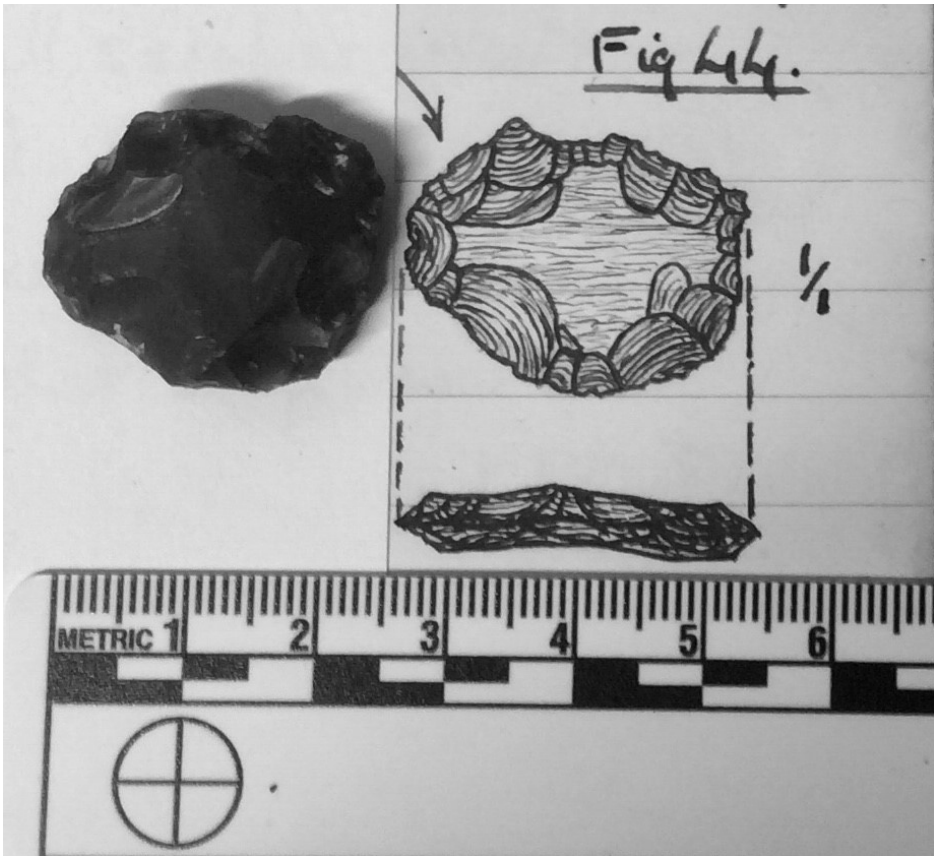


Figure 3. *Beaker period flint scraper from Scragg's Hole.*

Photo: A. Summerfield and W. Russ.

Figure 4 shows an iron nail from the 'Third Foot layer.' Stanton described it as 'not badly rusted and typically Romano-British in design' (1943, p48).

The most easily dated object is a coin of the Emperor Magnentius (Figure 5). This is a copper bronze nummus minted, probably in Trier, between 350 and 353 AD. This gives a *terminus post quem* of 350 AD for its deposition. Stanton (*vide supra*) was incorrect in stating a date of 354 AD.

Stanton stated that several pieces of worked bone were found. One was the Romano-British headless bone pin in Figure 6; the second a blunt ended bone graver which was possibly used to decorate pottery, some sherds had grooves which matched this bone; and a third was a tooth from a bone comb. One thick piece of bone of indeterminate use was also specifically mentioned.

The majority of the pottery finds also appear to be of Romano-British date and consisted of black burnished ware, grey ware and 'false Samian.' In all about forty items could be recognised. There was also a much smaller quantity of medieval pottery. Figure 7 shows a fragment of Roman Black Burnished ware or imitation grey ware, along with Stanton's log

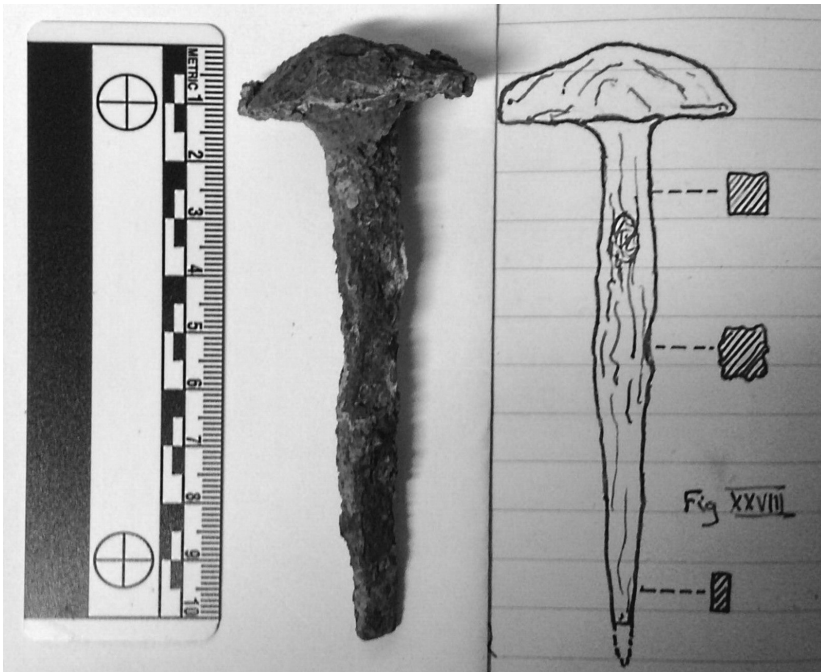


Figure 4. *Romano British nail from the 'Third Foot layer'.*
 Photo: A. Summerfield and W. Russ.



Figure 5. *Copper-bronze nummus of the Emperor Magnentius. Minted 350-353 A.D.*
 Photo: A. Summerfield and W. Russ.



Figure 6. *Romano-British headless bone pin.*

Photo: A.Summerfield and W. Russ.

book sketch of the same piece. The log states that this was found with other sherds from the same vessel, but these cannot now be identified in the collection.



Figure 7. *Sherd of Roman Black Burnished ware or imitation grey ware from the 'Fourth Foot layer'.*

Photo: A. Summerfield and W. Russ.

Much animal bone was recovered during the excavation, but only a limited selection was retained. This was mostly of domestic animals "of all ages to recent." Many long bones had been split, presumably to extract marrow.

SITE MAPS AND EXCAVATION PLANS

Over the course of the six years that Stanton was digging at the site, a series of plans showing the progress of the excavation were produced. There are at least ten of these and it is not necessary to reproduce them all here as the full logbook may be found in the supplemental material. However, a select few serve to illustrate both the extent of the excavation and some aspects of the methodology.

Stanton's 'Plan I' (Figure 8) shows the extent of the cave and of the excavation at the end of the first day's work on February 14th 1943. At this stage the cave was a small overhang beneath a cliff with two shallow (6 inch, 15 cm deep) trenches dug that day. Finds consisted of fourteen rabbit and mouse bones.

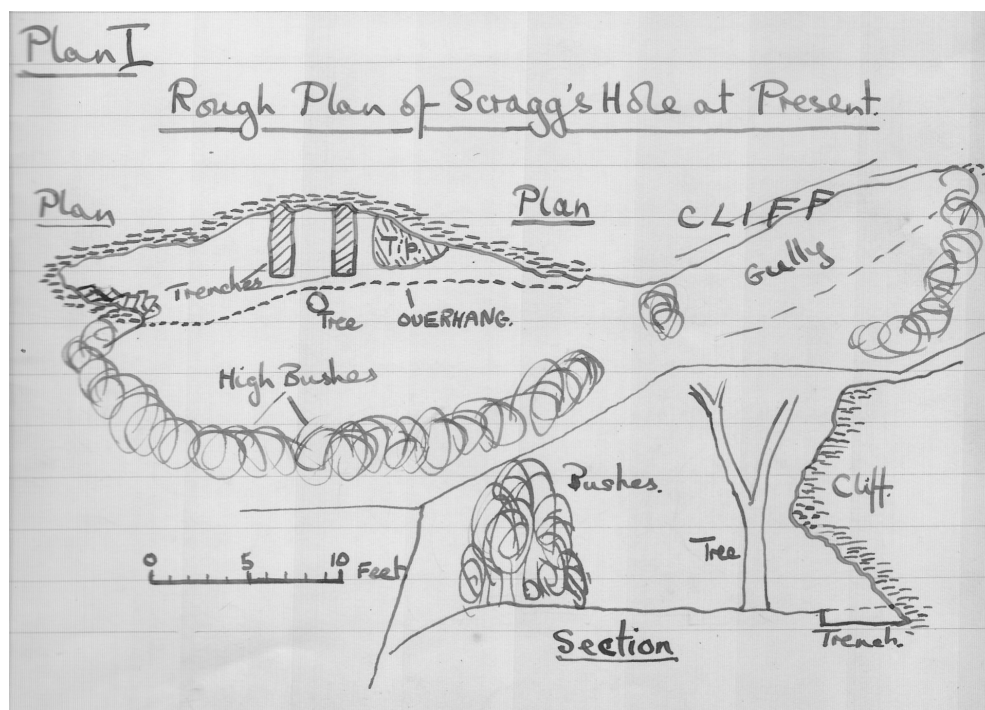


Figure 8. Plan and elevation of Scragg's Hole after the first day's work. February 14th, 1943.

By February 1944, the work had reached the 'Second Foot layer.' Stanton's 'Plan IV' shows that at this stage the known extent of the floor was being removed as a sequence of numbered areas and at a thickness of one foot at a time. The 'Pit' had been dug in in order to facilitate access to the working areas but in May 1944 was actively dug in order :

- a) to ascertain how much further we will have to dig before reaching rock-bottom
- b) to see what sort of finds we are likely to make in the lower levels
- c) to make a convenient pit for any excess water to drain into. (Stanton, 1943/4 p54.)

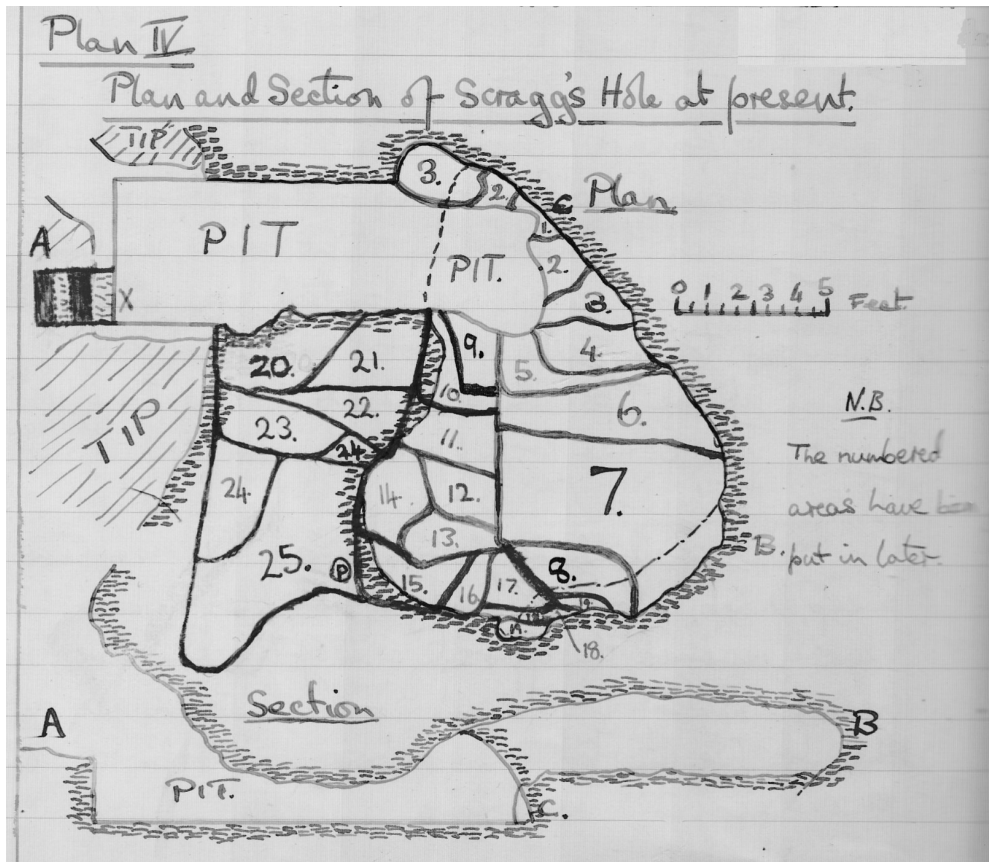


Figure 9. Plan and elevation of Scragg's Hole during excavation of the 'Second Foot layer' May 1944.

The 'First Foot layer' seemed only to have contained recent small mammal bones, but the 'Second Foot layer' was rather more productive, yielding a number of finds of presumed Romano-British age. A plan was drawn on September 23rd 1944 which indicated the two-dimensional locations of all finds within the 'Second Foot layer'. This is reproduced here as Figure 10. Similar plans were later drawn showing find spots in the "Third Foot layer" in March 1945 and the "Fourth Foot layer" in May 1945. It was after this point that Stanton realised that the entire deposit, save the first foot, contained Romano-British material down to bedrock and that later dateable finds including a twelfth-century silver halfpenny of either Henry I or Henry of Anjou (reign of Stephen) found in the fifth foot demonstrated considerable disturbance by burrowing animals.

Stanton's final day of excavation at the site seems to have been Saturday September 17th 1949. The final note in the log is a copy of a letter from Stanton to the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society to whom he lent the log in December 1951, at the time of their work at the site.

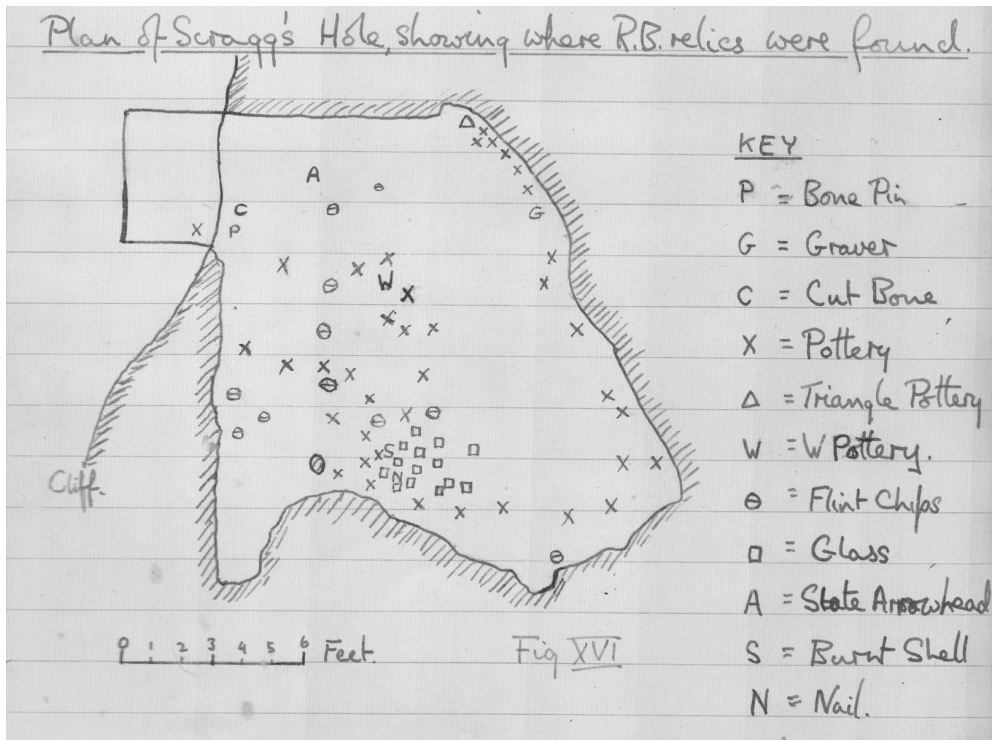


Figure 10. Plan of Scragg's Hole indicating finds spots of Roman-British material in the 'Second Foot layer.'

CONCLUSIONS

Willie Stanton's work in this cave was extraordinary given that he started work when he was 13 years old. Over a period of six years, more intensively in from 1943 to 1946, less so after that, he carefully excavated the floor area of the cave to a depth of 5 ft (1.5 m) finding the remains of up to forty pots, glass, pieces of worked bone, some flint, two coins and copious quantities of animal bone. He also found evidence of at least one, probably more, hearths, though these are not fully recorded on his plans. A full listing of the finds can be found in the supplemental material at http://www.ubss.org.uk/resources/procsupplement/27_3_xxx-xxx/ along with a copy of his logbook with index and a new survey of the cave.

His conclusion is that the site was primarily occupied during Romano-British times, probably around during the third and fourth century AD. This occupation would seem, tentatively, to have been short-term, perhaps seasonal, domestic usage. This conclusion agrees with that of Branigan and Dearne (1992) though they did not visit the site and had only limited information to work from. They do, however, note that Romano-British cave use on Mendip is "concentrated heavily in the late third and fourth centuries" (Branigan and Dearne, 1991, p43).

Stanton attributed the dearth of earlier finds to the supposition that the cave was sealed prior to about the second century AD and that its roof was breached, probably naturally, at

about this time. Had the site been available during the Pleistocene as a den or shelter then it would most probably have been as heavily used as the nearby Picken's Hole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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