

FISHMONGER'S SWALLET, NEAR ALVESTON, GLOUCESTERSHIRE DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the history of exploration and archaeological excavation at Fishmonger's Swallet, together with a survey and description of the cave and notes on its geological context and geomorphology.

INTRODUCTION: THE FISHMONGER

Fishmonger's Swallet is a small stream sink close to the village of Alveston in South Gloucestershire. It first came to the notice of Hades Caving Club in April 1994 (Hardwick, 1997), when members were searching for a cave digging project on the Bristol side of the River Severn. Initial research had identified various features of interest area. but almost every conversation with landowners, or anyone else with knowledge of the area, ended with the same comment "You need to speak to the Fishmonger." Soon, the telephone rang and a voice said, "Hello, I'm the Fishmonger."

Clive Grace grew up in Oldbury-on-Severn and made his living delivering fish to customers in and around Thornbury. He had been interested in the caving potential of the area for many years, having caved on the Mendips in his youth. By the time of that conversation, he had largely retired and had moved to North Somerset, but was keen to meet and show potential sites in the area. The penultimate stopping point on the first trip was the swallet on Forty Acre Farm which had been dug by Alan Clarke in the late 1970s (Clarke and Levitan, 1987). After discussing this and the club's digs in the Chepstow area, he asked, "Would you like to see my dig?" This turned out to be at a house just off the A38, then called The Loans but recently renamed The Manor House.



Figure 1. Location map, Fishmonger's Swallet, South Gloucestershire.
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Introduction was made to Mrs Joan Hawkins, the owner, and a visit was made to the adjacent copse where a small stream had cut a narrow gorge before dropping into a circular, quarry-like feature with a rubble floor, later to be named The Dell by the Time Team production crew. The stream was sinking between rocks against the right hand (east) face but in the far corner, low down against the north wall, was an obvious cave entrance, covered by a metal grill. Clive had excavated the cave, largely on his own, over a period of several years using a haulage system consisting of old Dexion shelving and fertiliser bags. Having reached a point where he was unable to continue, he was happy to arrange with Mrs Hawkins for the Hades Caving Club to take over the dig. The cave was subsequently dug to its current extent by them.

EXPLORATION: CAVE CHAMBERS, BONES AND LOTS OF MUD

The shaft Clive had cleared out terminated in a small chamber with a slot that was too narrow to pass. Through the skill of club member Francis Haden, then a student at the Camborne School of Mines, and his expertise and license to use explosives, this obstacle was widened and passed on 30th August 1997 (Hardwick, 1997) leading into a loose boulder ruckle and the first large chamber. When surveyed, the slot proved to be heading back under The Dell with the boulders being those filling that feature but at a lower level.



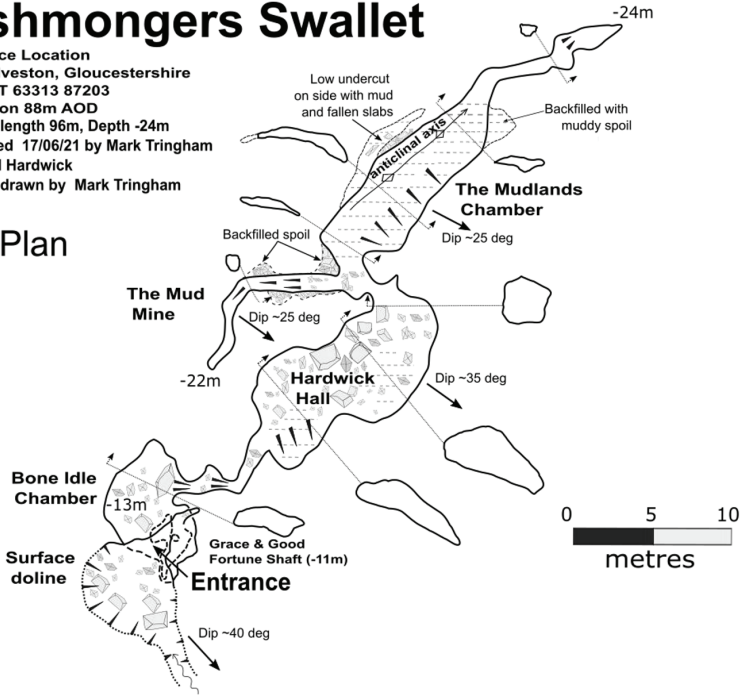
Figure 2. *The entrance to Fishmonger's Swallet.*

Photo © David Hardwick.

Fishmongers Swallet

Entrance Location
 near Alveston, Gloucestershire
 NGR ST 63313 87203
 Elevation 88m AOD
 Survey length 96m, Depth -24m
 Surveyed 17/06/21 by Mark Tringham
 & David Hardwick
 Survey drawn by Mark Tringham

Plan



Extended Elevation

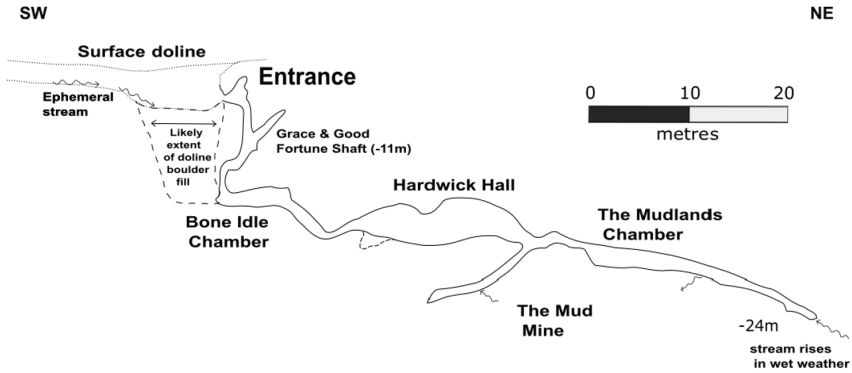


Figure 2. Plan and elevation of Fishmonger's Swallet.

From the start of the dig, bones had been found. Hades CC member Jack Randell was a neighbour of Professor Mark Horton, at the time head of the University of Bristol Archaeology Department and living in Wotton-under-Edge. All bones and other finds of interest were deposited with him for possible future analysis. The ones in the initial infill had clearly been washed in after the Fishmonger had stopped digging but those between the rocks and in clay

lower down and then subsequently in the boulder ruckle were potentially much older. No great antiquity was expected, however, as other finds included plastic bottles, tennis balls, crisp packets, drinks cans and anything else that could be easily washed into the cave. Unfortunately, the bones were all stored together rather than separated by date found so it is not possible to now ascertain the order in which they were retrieved and which ones were discovered together.



Figure 3. *The Mudlands Chamber, Fishmonger's Swallet.*
The upright poles are table legs in use as survey markers.

Photo: © David Hardwick.

The importance of the bones became more obvious when a larger chamber was entered as significantly more bones were then found. These included not only those of animals but also human remains, including a portion of a cranium. At this point the police were contacted and, having decided that the cranium was not of recent origin, this found its way to the University of Bristol and into the hands of Mark Horton, by a rather more circuitous route than the other material.

Whilst waiting for the police to make their conclusion, digging at what might have been a crime scene had to be suspended, and the name Bone Idle Chamber was first adopted for this part of the cave. Work could, however, continue on the far side of the chamber at a new dig site, one with no stream nor obvious draft. Gaps between boulders suggested a way down to a point lower than Skull Sink, where most of the bones had been found, and after several digging trips, a breakthrough was made into an even larger chamber roughly divided into two sections by a dip in the ceiling (Haden, 1997). The far wall of this new chamber was just out of the

reach of a torch beam. Partly in honour of the stately home in Derbyshire but more out of vanity, the chamber was named Hardwick Hall by the first person to enter it.

The next part of the exploration consisted of digging out mud and rocks to expose what appeared to be an arch at the far end of this chamber. Explosives were again used both to break up larger rocks to enable them to be moved and to form a way on. This created an opening into the next section of the cave (Haden, 1997). That is, at least on plan, the largest chamber found to date but with a height seldom higher than 1 m it has the appearance of a sloping bedding plane. The floor again consists of boulders that are likely to be from the roof but with no obvious active streamway into which they collapsed. The mud in this section is particularly thick and where the floor slopes down to the lowest point, the easy slide down can be quite a challenge to slither back up. The chamber is aptly named Mudlands. At the lowest point, a pool of fresh water was encountered, and that location was named Clearwater. Subsequent visits found that appeared to be an occasional pool of variable depth and often instead of water, there was just mud, making the name somewhat ironic.

Two digs were carried out after that. A left turn at the top of the Mudlands chamber immediately after the breakthrough point, reached a location where, although higher than Clearwater, the air appeared relatively fresh and significantly the site could be dug even when the lower part of the chamber was flooded. Occasionally, running water could also be heard in the rocks below. Digging down through particularly sticky mud and boulders, in what became called the Mud Mine, eventually reached a small stream of water entering from the side wall. This somewhat surprisingly was not the stream sinking at the entrance, which has not yet been re-encountered after Bone Idle Chamber, but was coming from the direction of Clearwater, which was subsequently proved to be the source. This stream was followed for a short distance below boulders heading south-west (i.e. towards the entrance and Skull Sink but at a lower level). As this was through the boulders under Hardwick Hall, it was not an easy dig.

Attention then focused on the Clearwater site as an alternative dig. A low passage through solid mud was excavated with a rock wall on the left and a mudbank on the right. Techniques here included kicking the mud when the stream was flowing to dislodge it, making the name Clearwater even more ironic, and dragging back trays loaded with an even more glutinous fine silt made the location of the Mud Mine equally inappropriate. The dug tunnel, aptly named Rectal Pull Through, reached a small mud lined pocket out of which the occasional stream flows. When dry, it was found that a view on continues downward through boulders and silt. After prolonged rain, the stream rises up from here and flows through the tunnel then south-west through the boulders beneath the Mudlands to the base of the Mud Mine.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

A reflection on the exploration of the cave would not be complete without comment on the media interest in the bones. There have been three television programmes made at the site and for each an underground excavation was filmed.

Hades CC did not have the financial resources to investigate the finds further, but fortunately they were discovered when the Channel 4 archaeology programme Time Team was at its most popular. They had completed their 6th series, which included a three day dig at Cooper's Hole in Chedder Gorge that first aired on 24th January 1999 (Channel 4, 1999) and were looking for material for the next series. Professor Mark Horton, who had already been involved in several programmes, suggested Fishmonger's Swallet and a meeting with the production team was arranged. The lack of finds at Cooper's Hole caused reluctance to engage

in another underground dig unless these could be guaranteed. Assurances that there would be plenty of bones at Skull Sink fell on deaf ears until Mark produced two fertiliser bags full of already excavated ones and the director was suddenly keen. Even if nothing new was found during the filming, they could analyse the previous finds and would definitely have a programme they could air. They also agreed to the radiocarbon dating of previously found samples although the results would be held back until filming so they could be announced on camera (see Bricking, *et al*, 2022a, this volume).



Figure 4. *Skull Sink, Fishmonger’s Hole, the site from which most of the bones have been recovered.*

Photo: © David Hardwick.

To facilitate filming, it was necessary to re-engineer the entrance to the cave. The pressure to just dig at Skull Sink, cherry pick the bones and back fill Bone Idle Chamber with spoil was resisted with Hades members insisting everything had to be taken out to the surface. The route across the boulder slope was unstable and although a length of redundant conveyor belt had been laid to limit erosion, the amount of anticipated traffic would undermine the already installed scaffolding shoring. Time Team operated, and kept to, a self-imposed three-day limit for filming but many evenings were spent in preparation for this, including digging vertically down below the end of the slot to enter Bone Idle Chamber directly adjacent to Skull Sink. Many of the bones analysed during the filming were recovered during this game of “Russian Kerplunk” rearranging the scaffolding. A notable thing about the involvement of

Time Team was that prior to the filming some limited funding was offered, resulting in second-hand scaffold clips and poles being sourced from a scrap dealer, but once on site with bones being found and a need for more shoring, there seemed to be a limitless budget to purchase new ones and, of course, hire a helicopter.

The original script included a focus on cave digging and how to identify and access a site with the intention of excavating one of the other nearby sinks using a mechanical excavator. Pre-filming appraisal of the finds revealed an unusually high proportion of dog bones, so Mark Horton suggested a possible comparison with an early Roman site at Lydney where a small bronze statue of a dog had been found. As a result, the cameo for the show was changed to the casting of a replica of that using the methods available during the late Iron Age period; a clear hint at the results of the carbon dating. The cast was presented to the diggers at the finale of the programme although in reality it was kept by Time Team and its current location is unknown.

Elements that did not make the final version included David Hardwick being interviewed by Tony Robinson about how the cave and bones were discovered and a lengthy discussion with the late Willie Stanton on the local geology, how caves form and different approaches to cave digging. There was also a session where the presenters discussed the likely appearance of the dogs, with what can only be described as an informal dog show parade of various breeds brought in by their owners keen to see their pooch on the telly.

As was usual on Time Team digs, a geophysical survey was carried out on areas around the cave. This work was carried out by GSB Prospection (2000). The survey report states that their resistance survey was largely inconclusive. They could not investigate the area immediately surrounding the cave entrance owing to electrical interference. Their magnetic survey did, however, identify two areas of potential archaeological interest, to the north and to the south of the cave. That to the north produced a profusion of anomalies but on excavation they were shown to be associated with recent burnt features, ploughed out boundaries and, possibly, clay-filled natural depressions. An area in the field to the south was excavated and a number of post holes were uncovered, two of which were dated by pottery finds to the Iron Age (Horton, 2022 this volume).

The key elements of the programme were based on the underground finds including a fractured skull that showed a woman had met a violent death and an older person with Paget's disease. Most important was a human femur that had been split lengthways, apparently to extract the marrow (Cox and Loe, 2022, this volume). At the time, that was the first example of possible cannibalism in the UK from as late as the Iron Age and so was a significant find. It resulted in a dash to get deer bones so that Time Team presenter Phil Harding could attempt to recreate the splitting of a bone using a flint, which he successfully did on camera. This resulted in a happy director and beer for the diggers.

The programme was first aired on Channel 4 on 25th February 2001 (Channel 4, 2001) After the film was completed, however, it proved difficult to get anything from the production team. The location of the finds, the property of the landowner, could not initially be obtained and even getting them to remove the skip from the adjacent field, filled with the rocks and clay from the dig, took many months. It was only through the persistence of UBSS Museum Curator, Linda Wilson, that the bones were located and eventually retrieved. They have now been formally donated to the Society's museum (see below). This also includes those found by Hades CC at other times and during subsequent filming (Cox and Loe, 2022, Peto *et al.* 2022, Bricking, *et al.*, 2022b all this volume).

The second filming session was for the series Revealed, for the episode Julius Caesar and The Druids first aired on Channel 5 on the 19th August 2008 (Change Productions, 2008).

The theme of the programme was the retreat of the Celts in the face of the Roman Invasion and the possibility that the bones in the cave related to events around a battle between the local Britons and the Romans made it an obvious inclusion. Another excavation took place at Skull Sink with fresh material being brought to the surface for analysis. The main objective was to try to locate a tooth for Strontium isotope analysis, not available at the time of the previous



Figure 5. *Hardwick Hall, Fishmonger's Swallet*

Photo © David Hardwick

filming. A number of teeth were available in the existing material but true to form the cave delivered, with a single tooth being brought out in the last bucket of the day. Analysis of this tooth confirmed that it belonged to somebody of local origin¹ (Horton, 2022, this volume).

The third film made at the site was for the series *Mystic Britain*, with Clive Anderson as the host. It was first aired as part of a programme titled *Isle of Druids* on Channel 5 on June 23rd, 2020 (Change Productions, 2020).

The material aired focused on a discussion of the skull and the split bone from the previous *Time Team* programme with Mark and Clive again recreating the splitting of a bone to expose the marrow. A small amount of underground filming was carried out showing the recovery of a few more bones although on this occasion no significant additional excavation was carried out.

THE FISHMONGER'S SWALLET COLLECTION – A CURATORS VIEW

Linda Wilson

The need for archaeological finds from caves to be suitably catalogued and stored is well illustrated by those from several caves in South Gloucestershire. The bones found in the 1930s at Alveston Bone Fissure ST 6144 8503, site designation G2 in the UBSS collection, reported on by Davy (1933) and Jackson (1933) were deposited in the Society's Museum but sadly destroyed when the Museum was bombed during the 'Bristol Blitz' in 1940 (Taylor, 1973). Those collected when the site was further excavated in the early 1960s (Gilbert, 1961) and reported on by Taylor (1973) were also deposited with UBSS. In contrast, the bones recovered by Alan Clarke in the late 1970s from Forty Acre Swallet were noted as remaining "in the possession of Alan Clarke" (Clarke and Levitan 1987). Attempts to locate this material continue.

Clive Grace, the fishmonger from whom the site takes its name, regularly found bones in the fill he was excavating when digging at the swallet (Clive Grace, *pers. comm.*) and when Hades CC took over, they also immediately found more. What Clive did with his finds is not known but the presence of what appeared to be gnaw marks on some of the early finds made by Hades CC, coupled with an awareness of the articles on the other local caves, suggested to the Hades team that these could be significant and so after each digging session they were bagged up with a note of the date and where they were found. These were then passed to the Archaeology Department of the University of Bristol for possible future consideration.

Time Team had always been closely linked with the University of Bristol through both Mick Aston and Mark Horton so it is perhaps not surprising that they became interested in the Alveston site. In the early years of the series, all digs were fully written up. By series eight, however, the production of reports seems to have been more sporadic. With their self-imposed three-day limit and the need to produce an entertaining programme it is evident that there was a focus on the show rather than the site. David Hardwick's comments (above) that the production team preferred to just remove the bones from the cave rather than sort through the whole deposit reflect this, although in the end water sieving for small finds was carried out at both of the first two filmed digs. A datum line was set up in the cave so that context could be recorded, and the actual recovery of the bones was carried out with suitable archaeological care. The specimens recovered at that time were labelled and catalogued with their context numbers.

¹ This result was presented during the course of the programme but does not appear to have been published elsewhere prior to the production of this volume. Unfortunately the data has been lost.

However, there seems to be no extant record of what those context numbers represent and so although this information can be used to show that certain specimens were found together, no more detailed analysis is possible.

Following the filming, the finds were all taken away from the site. The landowner was not made aware of their destination and was keen to have them returned for curation and display locally. Thornbury Museum was suggested as one possible location, but David Hardwick suggested the UBSS museum would be more suitable owing to the Society's long experience in the curation of bones and other finds from cave sites. Mrs Hawkins was agreeable to this as her late husband had a connection to the University. The problem was finding where the bones had been taken and this proved very difficult. Enquiries made to the production team did not receive a reply.

The faunal remains were the first to be recovered as these had been put in the hands of Andy Currant, then Curator of Fossil Mammals at the Natural History Museum, a long-standing UBSS member, who had been Time Team's animal bones expert for the filming. These were located at the NHM's premises in Tring and subsequently came to the UBSS museum in 2013.

Locating the human remains proved to be more difficult. Mandy Holloway made the breakthrough there, at the time of the visit to collect the faunal remains from Tring, by locating the initial unpublished report prepared by Margaret Cox, who had been Time Team's human remains expert for the filming. That report has now been revised (Cox and Loe, 2022, this volume). She informed us that the material was with Oxford Archaeology. The human remains came to the UBSS museum in 2014.

The bone from the person suffering from Paget's Disease was not amongst the specimens recovered from Oxford. That had been sent to the radiology department of the Bristol Royal Infirmary for scanning and its present whereabouts is unknown, nor have the results of the scan been found. The whereabouts of the pottery, much of it seemingly of Iron Age or Roman date, also remains unknown.

The collection was formally transferred to the UBSS Museum in 2018 when the filming of the Mystic Britain programme provided the opportunity for a meeting at The Loans with Mrs Joan Hawkins and her daughter, Veronica Northam. Mrs Hawkins and Mr Bernard Fennel, now both sadly deceased, were both extremely supportive of all the work on the site, disruptive as it sometimes was, and that support continued until the property was sold after Mrs Hawkins' death.

Since the collection arrived in the Museum, it has been possible to make the material available to new researchers and the first fruits of these collaborations appear in this volume with some surprising and important results (see Bricking *et al*, 2022a; Bricking *et al*, 2022b and Peto, *et al*, 2022 all this volume). Work on the collection continues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many who need to be thanked with regard to the discovery of the cave, its exploration and the discovery and research of the archaeological remains at Fishmonger's Swallet. First has to be Clive Grace, the Fishmonger, whose efforts gained access to the first part of the cave. Probably equally important is Francis Haden as without his explosives skills the slot passed to access the chamber containing the majority of the bones, and ultimately the rest of the cave, would not have been enlarged. Alongside this goes acknowledgement of the role played by Hades Caving Club in funding the dig materials including the money to

replenish Francis' explosive store. Following on from this it was Mark Horton's persistence in chasing media publicity, initially with Time Team but subsequently other production companies, that not only has given the site publicity but with this the funding to analyse the first bone samples. Without that analysis the significance of the site would not have been identified.

There are numerous individual who have helped with the various phases of exploration from the early exploration through to those involved in the most recent excavations, including those authoring other articles in this *Proceedings*. The work of Linda Wilson as curator of the collection also need acknowledgement as does the support of Graham Mullan.

It is appropriate that the biggest thanks are reserved for Mrs Joan Hawkins and Mr Bernard Fennel who for so many years allowed access for excavation and gave their active support of all that has been carried out, including the donation of the material found to the UBSS Museum. This issue is dedicated to the memory of Mrs Joan Hawkins. Our thanks are further extended to Mrs Hawkins' family, notably her daughter Mrs Veronica Northam, for continuing to allow access up to the point of sale of the land.

Finally, it is appropriate to also acknowledge the support of the new owners Mr and Mrs Potter who have already been most generous and supportive of the work at this site and we look forward to a long relationship with them.

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