

‘THIS EXCEPTIONALLY CURIOUS ROCK INHABITED BY
A CLEAN AND DECENT FAMILY’
THE STANDING ARCHAEOLOGY OF A ROCK HOUSE;
HOLY AUSTIN ROCK RECONSIDERED

by

EDMUND SIMONS

ABSTRACT

Holy Austin Rock (South Staffordshire) is the only domestic rock-cut building in Britain which has been restored and opened to the public. It has been the subject of earlier investigations and the enigmatic rock-cut houses have been thought to be 18th century in origin, as this is when they were first mentioned in the historical record.

This paper presents the results of a new survey and analysis of the site. As part of this study the fabric and archaeology were reinterpreted based on the current understanding of similar sites elsewhere. The paper establishes a mediaeval origin for many of the rock-cut buildings and details fragmentary but surviving diagnostic features such as inscribed crosses, medieval fireplaces, doors and moulding. Repeated later phases of re-use and abandonment of the site have confused the picture, but a much earlier origin than previously thought is demonstrated. The paper also explores the possible origin of the name Holy Austin and how this may relate to nearby sites with the same name.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summation of evidence from one of the case studies of the Rock-Cut Buildings Project (www.rock-cut.com), a project which is attempting to record and analyse rock-cut buildings in the UK, and to develop methodologies for understanding them. In many regards, Holy Austin Rock (the site) inspired the whole project, as when first assessed it became apparent that other, similar sites needed investigating as comparisons, thus necessitating a programme of recording and analysis. This paper is a short precis of the evidence, with some broad conclusions. It does not use the project typology (which will be published at a later date) but does refer to comparable sites which have been investigated as part of the project.

Holy Austin Rock is a complex of rock-cut buildings (known locally as ‘Rock Houses’) set on a large knoll of sandstone. It lies on the northern side of the sandstone ridge of Kinver Edge which straddles the Worcestershire/ Staffordshire border. It is a place the author has known all his life and on which he learnt the rudiments of building archaeology. He assisted in its excavation and restoration in the early 1990s and for 13 years he has been on the Kinver Edge Committee which supports the National Trust (the owners) in their work at Kinver.

With the later history (c1750-1950) being so well covered elsewhere, I will not replicate it in detail here. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to look at the development of the rock houses and to understand the standing (i.e. excavated from the rock) archaeology, to discern something (if possible) of the early history of the site and explore credible scenarios for the origin and purpose of some of the rock-cut structures.

The reasons for wishing to explore an early history are quite simple. The first known documentary reference naming the site, and its occupation, dates to the 18th century and, as we shall see, there are houses which probably belong to this period. Nevertheless, the stratigraphic relationships and wide variety of rock-cut spaces, complex phasing and comparison with

known and dated sites elsewhere, very strongly indicates that there are large numbers of structures here which predate the 18th century, possibly by some considerable time.



Figure 1. Location map for Holy Austin Rock.

© Crown Copyright and Database Right (2023).

The other important factor which warranted further exploration is the name 'Holy Austin Rock', of which, again, first mentions are 18th century in date (there is a possible reference dating to the 1650s, David Bills *pers comm.*¹), but a name that is very evocative and possibly showing of an early, possibly monastic, origin. The only archaeological study (Shoosmith, 1993) dismissed the idea of a monastic origin, for lack of evidence, and decided the complex was entirely 18th and 19th century.

Shoosmith's work was thorough but written without reference to similar sites

(at that time there was very little understanding or even identification of similar sites) and without analysing the complex phasing of the rock-cut structures and of the rock itself. The name is, perhaps, a telling indicator of antiquity², but, even without it, the early history of the site would still repay investigation and analysis.

Although Kinver and the surrounding parishes have more rock cut dwellings than elsewhere in the UK³, they do not exist in isolation and there are rock-cut dwellings throughout

¹ David Bills was a noted local historian who mentioned several times to the author that the site was first mentioned by name in the 1650s, unfortunately he recently died and the author has been searching through the archive to find this reference.

² The site has long been identified as a probable hermitage (see Clay, Rotha, M, 1913 who identified a number of probable medieval cave hermitages including Holy Austin).

³ Nottingham has numerous rock-cut structures, including some rock-houses, but comparatively few dwellings remain

the Midlands and indeed throughout the UK. Unlike Kinver, some of these sites have known or relative dates and it seemed sensible to compare them with the remains at Kinver. Similarly, in the local area is a very large number of similar sites, again, some with known or inferred dates, and comparing these to the remains at Holy Austin yielded interesting results.

The site is not listed or scheduled, but is in the care of the National Trust and is open to the public. In the 1990s it was rescued from ruination and parts were reconstructed and interpreted. I am very grateful to the Trust for access to the site and for being allowed to use images of it.



Figure 2. *Aerial view of Holy Austin Rock from the east, showing the three main terraces.*
Photo courtesy of Steve Sant Photography.

HOLY AUSTIN: GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Holy Austin is a large outcrop of Permian sandstone projecting out on the northern side of the escarpment of Kinver Edge on the Staffordshire/Worcestershire border. It is one of eight similar outcrops jutting out from the Edge, all of which have rock-cut buildings or features.

The ridge of Permian sandstone, belonging to the Kidderminster Formation and overlain by the Bunter Pebble Beds (Triassic water borne cobbles in sediment) runs for some four kilometres roughly north to south, with the west side being made up of very steep slopes and cliffs, punctuated by projecting outcrops of sandstone. The soft granular sandstone can be

and those that do are largely undated (see Waltham, 1996). There are over 70 identified rock-cut dwellings within a 5 km radius of Holy Austin and many more in the wider area (Simons, *forthcoming*).

quarried and cut with relative ease. It can be a poor building stone, but not always, as attested by the large number of medieval and later sandstone buildings which survive throughout the area. There are deposits which are harder and less granular and others which are friable and weak. The origin of the sandstone is aeolian and, in places, one may see the dune bedding within the rock, or layers of pebbles relating to ancient flooding events. The importance of the geology is recognised in the designation of the Kinver Edge Site of Special Scientific Interest and its incorporation into the Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark.



Figure 3. *Aerial view of Holy Austin Rock from the east showing house A (lower terrace) and extensive quarrying on this side.*

Holy Austin is dominated by the Kinver Edge hillfort which sits on the hill above it. It lies in a landscape that is now largely wooded, but in living memory was almost entirely open heathland and had been since the end of the last Ice Age (Simons, 2019). A large area of the Edge has been owned and maintained by the National Trust since 1919 and there is open access to its woods, heaths and cliffs.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The rock may have been exploited by humans from a very early date. In the past this area of open land sat above a network of now largely lost wetlands, the Stour Valley, Sterrymere and Ismere to the north and east, to the west the open Meres of Kinvermere⁴ and Sterrymere (Simons, 2019). Like all the numerous larger outcrops along the escarpment, it may

⁴ There are several sites locally historically called mere, some are clearly mere sites, others may use “mere” in the sense of a boundary. James (2023) has identified such sites as forming part of the boundary of the Royal Forest of Kinver.

have had small natural caves or overhangs which could have provided shelter from an early date.

A great deal is understood about the history of the site itself, particularly its later history, which has been extensively researched by local amateur historians.⁵ There is also oral histories, family records, a vast number of old postcards, drawings, paintings, maps and photos. In addition, there are still a few people surviving who lived at the site in its later days of occupation.⁶ There are a number of books and papers published about the site and other rock dwellings in the parish and there is an extensive archive of the century of National Trust involvement now housed at the Staffordshire Records Office.

There were probably cave dwellers in the area at an early date, but they are only hinted at in the historic sources. We have “the Clearing by Edwin’s Cave” in the Wolverley Charter of 1000, the mysterious “John Le-Hole” and Jack-in the Cave” mentioned in local charters (Willis Bund, 1919) and in 1617 Margaret of the Fox Earth (the ‘Fox Earth being the nearby large site known as Nanny’s Rock) was buried in Kinver Church (Greenslade, 1984 p122). The nearby Old Swinford Charter of 951-955 mentions a “Stone Cave”; Hook surmises this may be a barrow (Hook, 1990 p165), but an actual cave, which, given the local geology would probably be rock-cut rather than natural, seems more likely. This perceived paucity of early historical evidence has led to the presumption that the sites are more recent and that the name may even be an example of 18th century gothic fantasy (Willets, 2010, p79).

The rock was first described by the writer Joseph Heely in 1777. His description is quite thorough, he had clearly visited and inspected the site.

‘I found this exceedingly curious rock inhabited by a clean and decent family, who entertained me during the violence of the tempest with what they had done, how long they had lived there and the immense trouble they had been at in excavating the rock for their purposes. The rooms were really curious warm and commodious and the garden extremely pretty lying on a shelve of rock towards the south and full of every necessary even to luxuriance, this I was told cost them infinite labour as there was never a particle of soil upon that part until they brought it thither on their shoulders. ‘To account for this mass of rock being left in the middle of a large waste naked and distinct from any other is I believe not in my power: however I cannot think it probable the perpendicular sides are owing to(?) and that time past the rock was used as a stone quarry.

Indeed two sides evidently shew the marks of the tool upon them, and I don’t think it improbable that it was once joined to the Edge itself for I observed at the foot of that precipice another perpendicular scar with familiar marks upon it, as visible as at the rock right opposite and parallel in height . . . we may conclude that formerly both joined the chasm being but 20 or 30 paces between both. Believe me, it is a very great curiosity and well worth your observations.’ (Heeley, 1777).

⁵ Particularly D. Bills and W. Griffiths (see Bills and Griffiths, 1978) who collected much information on the occupants of the houses, also Peter Hodges (2017) who has collected photos of the site and the late Len Dunn who gathered together a wealth of historic postcards, paintings and pictures relating to the site and its restoration. See also Clark (2006).

⁶ The National Trust Committee Archives are currently being accessioned by the Staffordshire Record Office.

What Heeley's account seems to make clear, was that there is one family on the site, they had excavated the site themselves and he makes no mention of other caves or cottages.

The later history is one of increased occupation which can be traced through rents and census returns. By 1839 there are six cottages (Bright, 1830) and the numbers fluctuate at Holy Austin and nearby similar rock-cut sites throughout the 19th century.

This later history is a fascinating process of people choosing or being forced to live in rock houses because of a lack of adequate housing in the area. Certainly, the construction of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal in the 1770s and the massive growth of the nearby Hyde ironworks at the same time all played their part in necessitating the use of rock houses and the construction of several new examples.⁷



Figure 4. *The interior of House B on the the lower terrace, with a reconstructed room based on an early 20th century painting and photographs.*

By the early 20th century Kinver had become a major destination for day-trippers from nearby Birmingham and the Black Country.⁸ A tram ran from 1900-1930 and brought large numbers to the village and the Edge; during this period there was a tearoom within one of the rock cut houses at Holy Austin, which served these visitors with teas and refreshments and remained open until the 1960s. After this the site becomes abandoned, partly due to slum

⁷ Willets (2010) includes a detailed discussion of later ownership.

⁸ In part this was due to it being the setting of the first full-length British film 'Bladys of the Stewponney' (1912), based on the novel by Sabine Baring Gould (Baring Gould, 1897), the fictitious story of which was repeated in guide books for some decades.

clearance and it fell into neglect; the cottages were part demolished and elements of rock-cut buildings were removed. It was rescued in the 1990s by a group of local volunteers and the National Trust.

The 1990s rescue saw some of the caves restored and interpreted and the complete reconstruction of a row of sandstone cottages on the upper part of the rock (see Clark, 2006). These cottages have a rock-cut rear wall and are currently used as a tearooms and office space by the Trust. Since the initial restoration and reconstruction, there have been improvements which included displaying and refurnishing two of the rock houses, reconstruction of the early 20th century vegetable gardens, consolidation and improved facilities, access and interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

Many rock-cut sites share similar problems as to how they can best be recorded and analysed. These are buildings which may be used and re-used over very long periods of time; they are often the focus of use for marginal people, the rural poor, the homeless and the dispossessed and, as such, they are poorly represented in the historical record. Problems at Holy Austin include the following:

- *Lack of secure archaeological deposits*
Each set of occupiers tends to clear out rock houses; the stone floor surfaces are usually only covered by a thin layer of sand, dust or soil. Activity such as quarrying, terrace building and excavation of new rooms tends to destroy deposits in and around the structures. Even excavations at known medieval urban sites such as Lenton Hermitage Nottingham (Kinsey, 2001), Saint Catherines Hill (Shapland, 2020) and Anchor Church (Simons, *in prep*) have revealed that such deposits as there are tend to be related to the latest phase of activity, with anything earlier removed to bare rock.
- *Lack of a typology or understanding of similar sites*
The Rock-cut Building Project is the first attempt to look at these structures nationally as a group. Some sites are well understood, but there has been little attempt to understand their national and international context. The project has created a draft typology (which we hope to publish in the next issue of this journal) which establishes broad types based on dated examples. Quite why there even are identifiable types is a question the typology seeks to answer.
- *Not understanding the potential for preservation*
These structures are not caves! They are made from soft sandstone and there is always a presumption that this perceived “soft” nature somehow makes them vulnerable to quick decay. As both the Neolithic rock-cut chambered tomb ‘the Dwarfie Stane’ on Hoy, Orkney, and the rock-cut Roman figure of Minerva at Handbridge in Chester demonstrate, this is palpable nonsense. In understanding such structures we must seriously consider the potential for the survival of early fabric.
- *No methodology for understanding fabric and phasing*
Rock-cut sites have been widely studied elsewhere, and there are many methodologies for the recording of rock-cut structures as negative spaces. However, those methodologies do not often extend to the analysis of phasing sequences. Furthermore, no studies

have been carried out in the UK in order to develop such for rock-cut domestic buildings. To understand the sequence of events a simple, but specialised methodology is needed.

- *Taking historical sources too literally*

There has been a general presumption that when a rock-cut site is first mentioned in the historic record, this is an indication of when it actually dates from. Many of these sites are clearly used, abandoned and re-used over very long periods of time. There has been an over reliance on historical sources.

It became apparent at Holy Austin that the site (and the many near it) is far more complex than the limited earlier work suggested. There are limits to understanding such sites, but here, even without additional excavation, we can understand a little more of this unusual site.

Recording

A drawn, written and photographic record of the site was completed and a detailed laser scan, with point cloud and full colour outputs was created. This gives an ‘as existing’



record of the structures, complete with furnishings, interpretation boards etc. The scan was used to analyse the phasing and to search for eroded diagnostic features and early graffiti. Techniques were developed for inverting and shading scans which revealed layers of graffiti, tool-marks, scars etc. which were often hidden by later activity.

There is a perception that there is a lack of diagnostic features, or even an understanding of roughly dated examples with which to create a typology. This is partly due to the limited work carried out on such structures locally, regionally, or even nationally. Although there are some excellent examples of recording and analysis of rock-cut structures elsewhere in the UK, these are having often been carried out without reference to

Figure 5. *The mass of graffiti on the walls is, in places, incredibly dense. Much is obviously recent, but it is underlain by earlier designs and motifs.*

the wider corpus of similar sites.⁹

⁹ There is some excellent recording and analysis of caves in Nottingham in particular (see Kinsey, 2020), but the analysis often compares them to the (many) other structures locally rather than those further afield.

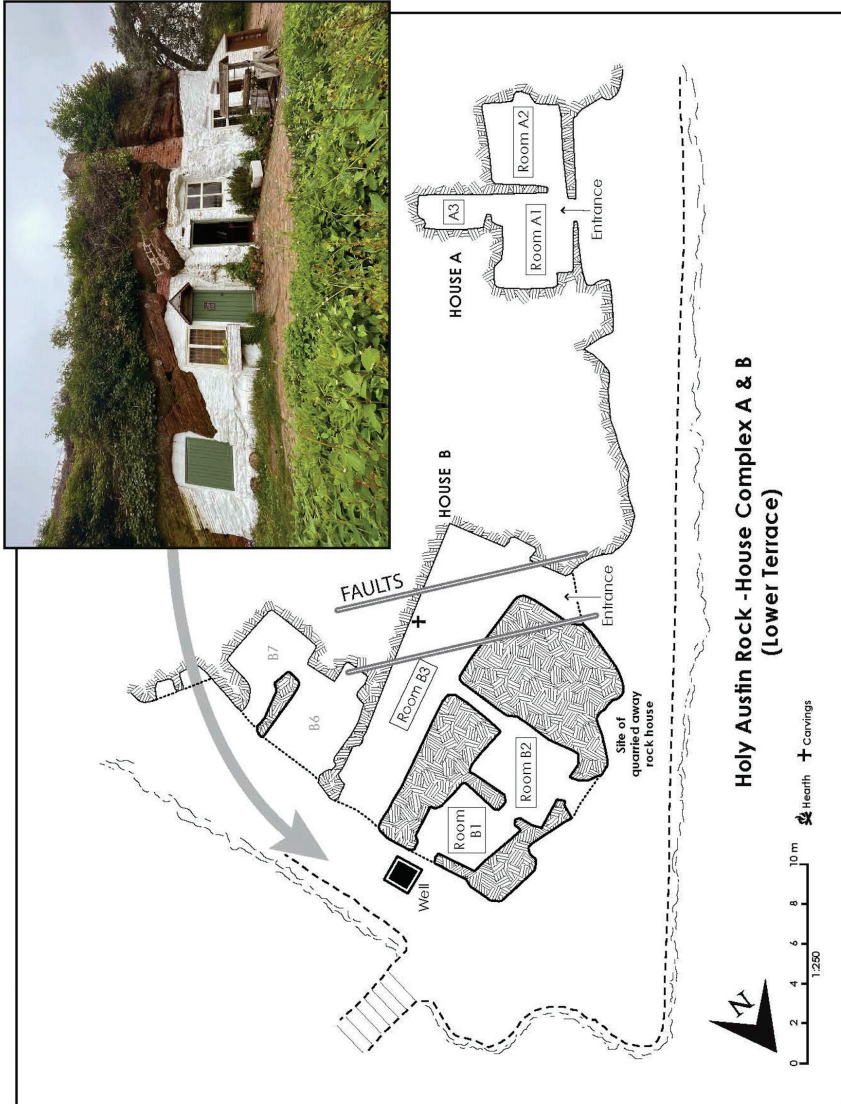


Figure 6. Floor plans of house complex A and B at Holy Austin Rock, lower terrace. Room numbers after Shoemith (1993).

Analysing the Sequence

There are a number of methodologies for understanding the phasing of rock-cut structures and there have been exemplary studies of sites ranging from mines and tombs to rock-cut temples and even towns.¹⁰ The simplest and most effective way to understanding the phasing of a rock-cut building is to work out the sequence of events that led to the current form of the structure. Sometimes, particularly where a site has been made in one event, this sequence may be obvious. Often, however, spaces can be complex and inter-cutting and assessing the sequence can be more difficult.

One advantage in potential that most rock-cut buildings have over more conventional built types, is that there is a greatly increased possibility that the earliest fabric may in some form remain. The main reason for this is the simple logic that unless a site has been entirely quarried away the earliest space (which we term the Primary Space) stands a very good chance of surviving in some form.¹¹

In sites which are set into natural cliffs or outcrops, the survival of the primary space is highly likely; logic dictates that primary space in a natural cliff is impossible to lose and must in some form survive. If the external, natural cliff face survives, the primary space must be present, even if there has been collapse or damage.

There are factors which may limit the usefulness of primary space. These include:

- Misidentification of sites.
- Enlargement and re-modelling of small primary spaces, leaving them only as a void.
- Sites which lie in quarried faces, the creation of which may have removed the primary space.
- Weathering and erosion making the primary space impossible to identify.

Holy Austin is extremely complex, with rooms cutting into rooms, connecting tunnels, alterations, weathering, demolition, roof crowning and vandalism all confusing the picture. As with any archaeological sequence however, it can be possible to define the order of phasing by working out simple stratigraphic relationships. Unlike a conventional building there is usually only one fabric, no datable materials, no joints, no overlying or underlying deposits. This can be a disadvantage, but, unlike conventional buildings there are properties which tremendously aid our ability to understand the phasing including:

- The propensity for some survival of fabric from all phases
- The survival of floors, roofs and walls, a series of 3d spaces which can be analysed.
- Enormous stability and the possibility of long-term preservation.
- Survival of soot deposits, paint etc.
- Potential for datable calcite and fungal deposits.

These factors mean that it can be possible to define the sequence of events in more detail than with a conventional building. Interventions and additions can be very obvious in the way they cut through earlier structures or are placed in the rock matrix. With some sites simple plans and elevations can suffice to demonstrate the sequence of construction.

¹⁰ See Redvers-Higgins *et al.* (2011) for an excellent detailed example of how to understand the phasing of underground quarried structures.

¹¹ Many buildings are set into the back of quarried faces and the construction of these quarries may have entirely removed earlier structures.

PHASING AND DEVELOPMENT

The rock has three main levels (or terraces), all of which have been cut into what was clearly a far larger mass of sandstone which has been reduced by quarrying. The lower part of the rock flares out and is less quarried than the more easily accessible terraced upper levels. This lowest part of the rock has some minor rock-cut features, including a substantial partly rock-cut building, which are not considered in this analysis.

The lower level of houses, known locally simply as rock houses, is set into quarry faces, the quarry on the east side being quite shallow and forming the frontage of three houses. On the north and west sides, the quarrying is higher up and phases of extraction of blocks are clearly visible; this forms the façade of a single house and has openings to two others. At the centre of this level is a large room known as “the ballroom” which was formerly subdivided.

The middle level is far more fragmentary and fragile (and currently closed to visitors); there are two main identifiable houses, both cut into the surface of the rock itself rather than into a quarry.

The upper terrace is better preserved than the middle, although demolition in the 1960s removed several rooms on the east side. The south end of the level is formed of a row of cottages, these are built of stone blocks, but have rock-cut rear walls, stairs and some rooms, they were totally reconstructed in the 1990s and are currently used as tea rooms and office space. To the north lie the fragmentary remains of a rock house that was in use in the 19th century and includes a long access tunnel between two rooms.

I have included a description of the various structures using the same room numbers as Shoemith (1993) but with the upper floor added as this was not included in his work. Following the description of each terrace is a brief discussion of phasing and development.

House Complex A

Description

A dwelling of two rooms with a pantry, each room has a large rectangular fireplace which were served by flues and chimneys which run up the outside of the cliff and have been recently reconstructed in brick. Around the top of the walls of room A1 are holes for (and a couple of surviving) iron tenter hooks for hangings or wall cloths.

Phasing and development

The house only partially appears in a 1846 drawing by Buckler. In this drawing the door may be shown and one of the chimneys, but no windows. This demonstrates that the layout we now see postdates this picture and that the house had two phases of construction. The lower terrace at Holly Austin (at Drakelow, Worcs, some 3 km to the south) was built in the 1850s (Gilley, 1991, p18) and is very similar in scale, form and design. The enlargement of House A and the Holly Austin examples probably represent the very last phases of the construction of new rock-houses in the area. Although probably built in two stages, it is a skeuomorph of contemporary domestic housing.

House Complex B

Description

This complex is made up of three separate dwellings on the same level as House Complex A. More accurately, these were separate dwellings at the time the site was last

occupied. One has been partly refurbished for display. There is good historical evidence for their occupation during the 19th and 20th centuries. The evidence includes a remarkable painting, numerous postcards, accounts and census returns, rent records and accounts (particularly see Bills, 1978 and Willets, 2010).

At the north end of the complex is a single dwelling made up of rooms B1 and B2, now known as the 'Fletcher House'. There is a 1903 painting of this room by Alfred Rushton



Figure 7. *The 'Ballroom. Room B3. This was divided into three in the early 20th century but has been restored as one large space.*

RA¹² which provided ample evidence for the restoration of the interior, as did what loose fabric (brickwork etc) had survived abandonment and vandalism. The house comprises of B1 (a heated kitchen with range, brick oven and tiled floor) and B2 (a bedroom with small corner fireplace and a window deeply cut into the wall). A deep narrow passage runs south from the house and connects it with room B3.

The centre of the complex formed a separate dwelling and is unlike anything seen elsewhere at Holy Austin or locally. It comprises of one space, B3, which was formerly three rooms separated by (now lost) brick walls. It now survives as one space commonly known as 'The Ballroom'.

Only the former east room of the dwelling was lit by a door and window in the east wall. The central windowless room was accessed by the passageway from B2 and the western room from a narrow rear door accessed from a passage from the northern terrace. B5 is wider has a hearth in the west wall and although its ceiling is somewhat higher, partly due to collapse, it is clear that it was always higher than the spaces to the east.

The final part of the complex is made up of rooms B5 and B6, a house no longer open to the public and commonly known as the 'Bat Cave'.¹³ Room B6 comprises of a room with a hearth and probable pantry with a door and window. B7 was unlit but had a door which (due to the depth of the rock) is accessed by a short curving passage. It is connected to the ballroom by a very narrow opening with a pointed arch.

¹² There are two copies, one of which now hangs in the Kinver Constitutional Club.

¹³ It houses a large colony of Lesser Horseshoe bats and has been closed since the 1990s.

Phasing and development

The outer faces on the north and west of this level have been extensively quarried and the quarry faces have been neatly dressed back, as shown in the numerous pick marks. There are a few holes in the rock which probably supported the quarrymen's scaffolding and were too deep to dress. On the west side of the quarry face there are the remnants of the bases of two small rock houses; these have been cut away by later quarrying and one retains a door jamb with channel for a timber frame.

On the east side, the quarrying is far less and the excavated terrace is only deep enough for the doors and windows of the row of houses. This is probably because the thin bedding seen above the doors and windows was not suitable for extracting building stone but would require removal prior to quarrying.

The 'Fletcher House' (B1 and B2) and the southern 'Bat Cave' (B5 and B6) are similar in plan and form to House Complex A, and to the dated examples at Holly Austin, Drakelow, and the probable 18th century examples at nearby Vale's Rock, Hobro Down, Drakelow (South), Honeybrook, Astle's Rock, Sampson's Cave and several others in the wider area (Bridgnorth and Bewdley towns in particular) (Simons, *forthcoming*). These similarities, along with broadly datable features, such as the cross mullioned windows seen in the Fletcher painting, and Heeley's (1777) description of a "recently excavated" house all suggest a late 17th-18th century origin for the main excavation of these houses.

The very large, very deeply cut 'Ballroom' (B4) is far more difficult to understand. It is irregular in shape, cut deeply into the rock, and two of its rooms had no natural light. Whatever their history or use during the latter phases of occupation of the site, the reasons for making the effort to cut such a deep unlit space are difficult to determine. Phasing is clearly visible in the fabric, with the central and western areas having obvious pick marks and being far less eroded. The southern wall of the west end is different in construction, with smooth walls covered in fragmentary layers of whitewash and fungi over early inscribed graffiti which only survives in small areas. Amongst this graffiti there is a long-armed cross and a single cross pattée.

At the east end of the 'Ballroom' the single, narrow opening with a pointed arch is an unusual feature and may be a survival of earlier fabric which has been obscured by later excavation.

From the standing archaeology it is possible to work out the sequence of events which may have led to the creation of this unusual space. When one looks at the western entrance, it is apparent that the deep cleft in the rock in which it sits, is geological rather than archaeological. It has been quarried away in places, but the bases and upper parts of the natural cleft remain. This cleft follows the line of two sheer planes (or faults) which can easily be seen within the room. This and the slope of the north wall of B5 and the former height of the roof may suggest that this was a small natural cave which has been adapted, massively enlarged and incorporated into a rock-cut building. This is seen elsewhere locally at a number of sites. At what point it was extended to the east is unknown, but it is possible that the western part (B3) with its similar openings to its neighbours may be as late as the 18th century, or that the door may have replaced a passage type entrance.

Deep, large, windowless rooms, created from enlarged caves are not associated with the construction of 18th century rock houses in the immediate area, but may be near to them and used for storage. The most comparable examples are found at three sites: Bridgnorth Hermitage Caves, Blackstone Rock, Bewdley, and Redstone Rock, Stourport. All three of these sites were medieval hermitages and appear to have grown around a natural cave which was the original

focus of activity (Simons, *forthcoming*). The evidence at Holy Austin is limited, however, but is suggestive of an early origin and scientific dating may prove useful in the future.

House Complex C

Description

On the terrace above B cling the fragmentary remains of a number of rock houses. These are very decayed, having been subjected to weathering, vandalism and the activities of busy masonry bees. They were, in part, occupied until the 1870s (Bills and Griffiths, 1978 p8) and appear on a number of prints and photographs. Unlike Complexes A and B they are made up of a smaller and more irregular rooms with lower ceilings and which are cut and intercut into each other.

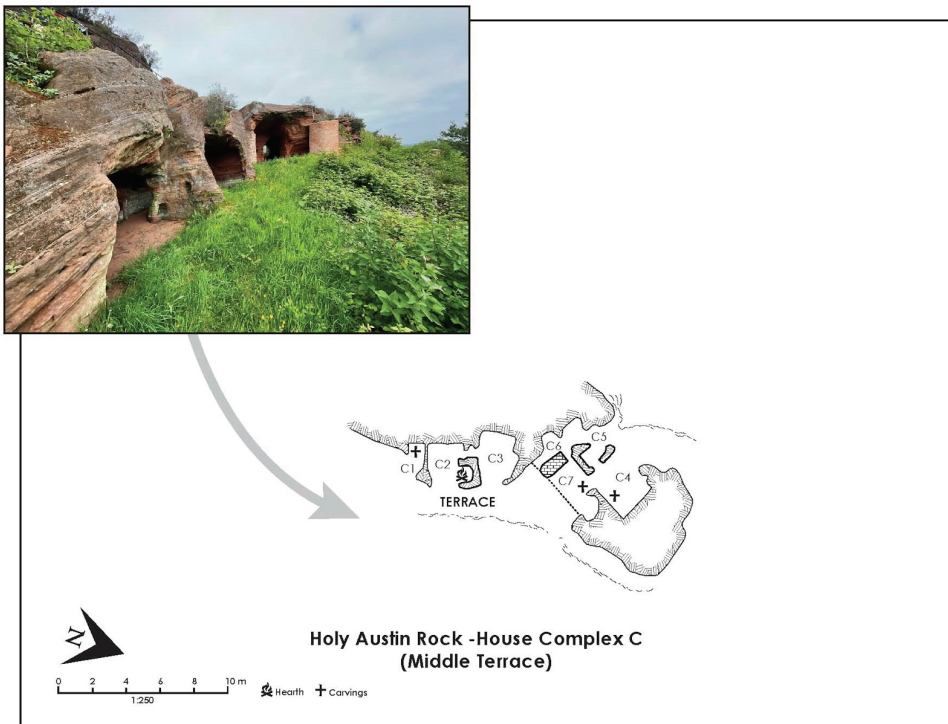


Figure 8. Floor plan of house complex C at Holy Austin Rock, middle terrace.

The small group of three rooms at the southern end of the terrace seem to make up a unit. This has been cut into a natural exposed outcrop and despite weathering, it is difficult to work out how the west wall was constructed, but joist pockets to support a timber front are visible in C1 and C2. These rooms have exceptionally low ceilings and the spaces were tiny. They were joined by two, probably originally three, small arched doors, channels for the frames of which remain. In C2 there is a round backed hearth with chimney above and the door jamb from C2 to C3 contains a number of niches.

The upper parts of the walls C1-3 are very weathered and tool marks etc. are only clearly visible on the lower parts. This may suggest that they were infilled at some point. The graffiti is largely modern, although in C1 there are two possible very faint long-armed crosses.

To the north lies another fragmentary but larger complex of rooms whose floors are partly filled with sand. The main spaces are C7 and C4 which were large sub-rectangular spaces; C7 having a large round hearth and C4 a small corner hearth. C5 and C6 are more irregular spaces which appear to be part of an enlarged natural cleft in the rock, they contain niches which may have held cupboards.

The terrace on the west, outside C4 and C6, leads to a now fragmentary external pathway which once led, rather precariously, to the level above.



Figure 9. *The tiny arched doors in house C on the middle terrace are quite unlike those seen in the houses below.*

Phasing and development

These two houses are quite unlike those we see on the terrace below, this isn't just due to condition, they are different in layout, form, volume and construction and there are a number of features which suggest a much earlier origin.

There are inscribed crosses, including a forked cross, in rooms C7 and C4 and possible crosses in C1; all must have a pre-reformation origin.¹⁴

The two round corner hearths, in C2 and C7, may also be medieval in origin. Both are fragmentary, but there is enough surviving fabric to compare them with known medieval rock-cut examples at probable 13th and 14th century local sites including Redstone, Blackstone and Bridgnorth Hermitage. The hearth in C2 is tiny and can only be tended from a squatting or kneeling position. It has a round back but retains the footings of two projecting pilasters which can only have supported a very low smoke hood. The hearth in C7 is larger and is now almost lost, but the author recorded it prior to removal and when more intact was visible on old photos and a film from 1931 (Pathe News, 1931). Again, there is a rounded rear to the hearth, with the very degraded remnants of pilasters and a beam slot, which appears to show it had a projecting smoke canopy, again a feature only found in later medieval rock-cut sites and absent from dated 18th and 19th century examples. The chimneys may have remained in use or been rebuilt at a later date and it is shown on the Thomas Peplow Wood drawing of 1839.

All the surviving doors and openings on this level have simple round heads and, apart from the door from C7-C4, are very low, particularly in rooms C1-C3. They are quite unlike the square headed doors seen on other levels and at known 18th and 19th century sites.

Shoemith (1993) saw this complex as one dwelling, with Rooms C1 to C3 as stores. Rooms C1, C2 and C3 do have some similarity with small (undated) probable storage caves seen elsewhere at Holy Austin, (and at Vale's Rock, Holly Austin etc.), but, unlike these, they are clearly an inhabitable space, with a semi-circular hearth in the central room. These three rooms are tiny, and to get through the doors, one must almost walk on one's knees; bolt holes for doors show that the occupant could lock themselves in. The presence of a fragment of modern cementitious mortar by a doorway demonstrates they were in use at a late date.

A key point that may indicate an early origin is that this is a shallow excavation into the exposed natural rock surface. It has not been cut away by later quarrying or alteration. The nearest comparisons in size, shape and detail are the, now backfilled, monastic cells at Hermitage Rock, Bridgnorth, or the smaller cells at Redstone Rock Hermitage, Stourport.

The northern group (C4-C7) are far more fragmentary. They were clearly in use in the 19th century, but abandoned by the 1870s (Bills and Griffith 1978, p8). The corner hearth in C4 may belong to this period. There is also a surviving length of vertical moulding in C5, a feature not seen in later dwellings. The complexity and irregular form of the large round hearth in C7 shows similarity to known medieval examples elsewhere; unfortunately it has almost entirely been eroded away and the construction of a supporting wall in 2022 obscured what little remained. It is unlike the 'inglenook' hearths or bases for stoves frequently found in 18th and 19th century examples and is very similar to medieval examples elsewhere.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Matt Champion, author of *English Medieval Graffiti*, for confirming this attribution. He identified that Post Reformation uses of inscribed crosses are rare and that several of the types found at Holy Austin, particularly the debased pattée and forked examples, are likely to be medieval.

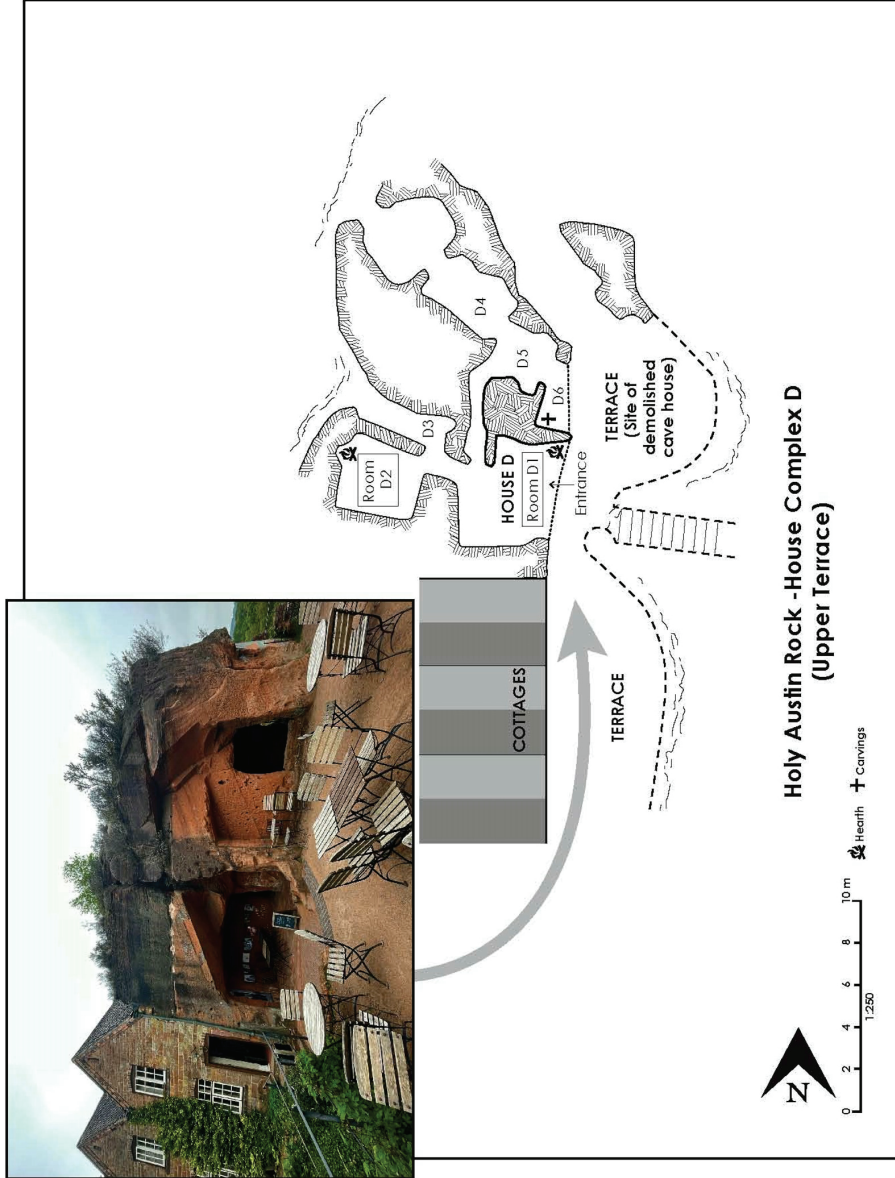


Figure 10. Floor plan of house complex D at Holy Austin Rock, upper terrace.

House Complex D

Description

Complex D is the uppermost level of rock houses at Holy Austin and part of it now houses the reconstructed cottages and a terrace used by the tearooms. The upper part of the rock has been cut by numerous phases of quarrying, and, as Heely's (1777) description shows, even by the late 18th century the stone which once linked the rock with the rest of Kinver Edge had been extracted, leaving some of the vertical faces we see today. Demolition in the 1950s removed the eastern part of the rock houses on this level and the drill holes left by the demolition are still visible on the rock.

To the south lies the reconstructed row of 19th century cottages (D1). These were a faithful reconstruction of 1990, based on old photographs and comprise three sandstone-built cottages which were set into a former quarry. The rear (west) walls were terraced into the rock as were staircases and small ancillary spaces, one now used as a kitchen.

To the north of this lay a complex of houses and rooms which now survive in a fragmentary form. D2 is an open sided room. Photos survive from when it still had doors and windows. It has a large round hearth on its north side with chimney above. To the west lies D3, a room cut deep into the rock with a hearth on the west wall and access to a small external terrace on the north side.

D1 also gives access to a deep curving tunnel which leads to D4 a room with an arched entrance on the west side and a blocked entrance to the north. This once gave access to the precarious rock cut path which led to the houses below, shown on numerous paintings and postcards. Other rooms which have been demolished now only survive as a pillar and a rock cut hearth on the terrace outside. Most surviving elements on this level appear to be very similar to sites identified as medieval during the preparation of the wider draft typology (Simons, *in prep*).

Phasing and development

The southern buildings are the easiest to date, all belonging to the reconstruction of the early 1990s, but on the footprint of the 19th century houses.

The surviving rock houses are fragmentary, but, as on the level below, were cut into natural outcrops and not into quarry faces. There are a few diagnostic features; Rooms D1 and D2 have flat headed doors of a type seen in 18th and 19th century examples. The hearth of D1, however, hints at an earlier origin. It only survives in a mutilated form, but again appears to have a similar round back as the two examples on the floor below. A possible pocket for a timber retaining a supporting smoke hood survives, but almost everything else is cut away. The hearth is also at a higher level than the current floor and this has been part cut away, perhaps for a later range or stove. What this may indicate is that there was once a higher floor level which was lowered during alterations to the house. Next to the fireplace is an unusual blind arch with shallow head, bounded by a simple moulding, this was later incorporated into a cupboard.

The narrow passage from D1 to D5 is also suggestive of an earlier dwelling as is the (much eroded) door between D5 and D4. This was clearly once very tall and very narrow with an arched head, quite unlike later examples.

Perhaps the most telling evidence is the survival of simple carved crosses and debased IHC monograms. These are difficult to differentiate from later vandalism (and one must be careful to avoid a + used as an &, as in Dave + Tina!). But there are plausible crosses,

particularly in the remnants of D6, as well as a probable IHC monogram and some unusual human figures, which may be modern, but suggest some antiquity.



Figure 11. *This fragmentary hearth in Room D 1 typifies the complexity of the site. A hearth with round back, sat next to a lost wall, with a (partly surviving) chimney above. A single joist pocket may indicate a smoke hood. At a later date the floor was lowered and a more simple hearth with brick chimney set to the front of the redundant hearth.*

DISCUSSION

The general assumption made by all of us who have been involved with the site, has been that the name suggests a loose association with a monastic origin, generally attributed as the dwelling place of ‘a hermit’. As the site is not mentioned until the 18th century, this has remained a rather vague concept and has not been explored.

With basic stratigraphic analysis, and using the unpublished draft typology to compare it with other sites, it was possible to establish that the middle and upper terraces at Holy Austin contain a number of probable early features, including tiny arched doors, inscribed crosses and hooded fireplaces. These features are all damaged and eroded, but their presence demonstrates at least a Late Medieval usage of the site.



Figure 12. *The rooms C1-C3 are very small and cut into the natural slope of the rock.*

In addition, all these features have very close similarities with known medieval examples – and possibly even Early Medieval examples – at Bridgnorth Hermitage, Shrops; Blackstone Rock, Redstone Rock, Worcs; Dale Abbey Hermitage, Anchor Church, Derbys; Pontefract Hermitage, Yorks; St Mary Le Roche Sneinton Hermitage, Notts; and several other sites. Conversely, despite later inhabitation and modification, they do not particularly resemble the dated 18th and 19th century examples with their straight-headed doors, ranges, stoves,

pantries and predictable regular plan form, seen both here, on the lower terrace, and elsewhere locally.

Therefore, it seems, the man-made structures at Holy Austin don't fall easily into a simple pattern of development and it is not possible to see them as nearly contemporaneous with each other, they represent the reuse by 18th and 19th century workers of much earlier structures.

The 'Ballroom' remains enigmatic. Although much cut by later room creation, it is clear that the west entrance is set in a natural cleft formed by faults in the rock which may have been exploited and enlarged. This is, perhaps, the most likely spot for early use of the entire site, the three inscribed crosses (one patée) demonstrate a highly likely pre-Reformation origin. But when was the space created, and for what purpose?

The only rock-cut caves of similar dimensions elsewhere are examples at Blackstone Rock, Redstone Rock, St Mary Le Roche and Bridgnorth Hermitage. In addition, the 'Ballroom' is oriented roughly east-west and is at the heart (ie the most undisturbed part) of the rock. On this evidence it may not be too fanciful to speculate that this is a chapel or refectory for an early hermitage?

Perhaps the most intriguing group in the whole rock, are the three tiny rooms, cut into a natural outcrop, on the middle level (C1-3). This miniature structure is of a type only found at medieval sites and is one of the best surviving examples. It is very similar to the probable cells on the lower terrace at Bridgnorth Hermitage and at Redstone Rock. If there is anything on the site that has the potential to be the remains of an eremitic structure, it is these three possible cells, surviving as they do purely because they have been cut into a sheltered outcrop, which was not suitable for later quarrying or house cutting. The fireplace appears to be later medieval (13th-15th century?), but it could have been inserted into an earlier structure.

What has been a surprise at Holy Austin, is the survival of (very fragmentary) diagnostic features which demonstrate at least part of the fabric is medieval (or earlier). The round hearths and smoke hoods, now barely survive, but enough can be traced to compare them to examples at known medieval sites, both conventional and rock-cut. Similarly the single piece of moulding and the single pointed arched opening are of medieval type. The graffiti may be the definitive piece of evidence. It is fragmentary and crude, hidden under layers of modern vandalism, but in places it is covered by whitewash and fungi which shows some antiquity. The extensive use of crosses is almost certainly pre-Reformation and not the product of idle modern hands. The project has found numerous examples of very similar graffiti throughout the UK, all in sites with suspected early origins.

So, what does this all mean? The two elements of the name are, of course, highly suggestive of a religious origin. 'Holy' speaks for itself and one could easily conclude that 'Austin' might refer to Austin Friars or Austin Canons. This suggestion of a religious origin is further re-enforced by the presence of both another (larger) group of very similar rock houses some two miles to the south at Drakelow, which were formally called "Holly Austin", and the hermitage of Nanny's Rock a mile to the north (Simons, *in prep.*).

As for "Austin" the most obvious origin for this name is that both sites are associated with the Augustinian order, commonly known in England as Austin. The portmanteau name of 'Holy' and "Austin" suggests that the Austin element is not a personal name.

Yet, there is a problem with simply ascribing the 'Austin' element to the Augustinians. The rule of Augustine is one of the earliest adopted and its adherents change over time and space; they include Augustinian Friars, Augustinian Canons and other followers of the rule of Augustine which may include hermits and other lay people. The most likely candidate would be the Austin Friars, an order which arose in Italy and was specifically created to absorb earlier

less structured eremitic orders and groups of hermits. They created a network of hermitages in England and, as they had in Italy, they took over and regulated the eremitic life. An Austin hermit, living in a holy rock, would be a very neat solution to the origin of the name. The problem is that Augustinian Friars do not arrive in England until 1249, most of the records of the order survive and there are no records of a house in Kinver.

The Austinian Canons arrive in the 12th century however, and their records are more patchy. They are known to have encompassed earlier eremitic settlements (e.g. at Llantony and Bristol).¹⁵ In addition, some hermits were known as Austin Canons or friars, when they had little or no formal association with the order (Roth, 1966). This could mean a hermit (or hermits) at one or both sites was regarded as an Austin Friar (even if they weren't) and the name simply stuck in local memory.

Despite the appeal of this scenario, the lack of any records relating to friars or hermits or a hermitage at this site is slightly problematic. This is not due to a sparsity of records. Kinver was the chief town of the Royal Forest of Kinver and we have later medieval records of the Royal Forest. They make no mention of a monastic site or hermitage.¹⁶ There is a single mention of a hermitage recorded in the Royal Forest of Kinver at 'Guthersburn', granted by Henry III in 1248 to Brother Walerund of Kidderminste. Guthersburn has been identified as Gothersley (a hamlet of Kinver) (Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry III: Volume 4, 1247-1258 in Greenslade 1984 p 123) and there is no reason to question this identification.

With good later medieval records and with only one mention in the area of eremites, it may suggest that the name could reflect an earlier (pre 12th century) site that was still remembered in the later Middle Ages. The name "Austin" being used as a catch-all term for eremites from this period could have been applied to merely mean Holy Monks Rock. There are undoubtedly many hermits and communities of hermits which are lost to history and this, seemingly, is one of those sites.

Like so many rock-cut sites, the place was likely to have been abandoned several times and people moved in and out on numerous occasions. There may have been a hermit, or a community of hermits, vagrants, workers, quarrymen and those seeking shelter, all before Heely's "clean and decent family" were encountered on that wet thundery day in 1777. The traces these possible earlier occupants have left are rather faint but indicate a much richer history than we originally imagined.

Holy Austin Rock is a beautiful and enigmatic place, it will keep many of its mysteries, but the project still has work to do there. It is one of a great number of similar sites that we have been recording and analysing as part of our work, but it is one of the few open to the public and the only one with a tearoom. I recommend the rock cake, and a hunt for crosses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the National Trust staff and volunteers at Kinver, Sue Wright and the Kinver Edge Committee, Dr Geraint Coles, Phil Brown and late David Bills MBE John Greaves Smith and numerous others who have helped me to try to understand the site.

¹⁵See Robinson (1980) for a discussion of how the order took over earlier sites, some with an Early British Christian Origin.

¹⁶The forest records are patchy (see Grazebrook, 1919) and the forest remains poorly understood, however a recent paper (James, 2023), has defined the bounds and will be invaluable in future research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baring Gould, S. 1897. *Bladys of the Stewpony*. London. Methuen & Co.
- Gilbert, D. and Kinsey, G. 2001. *A Survey of Caves at Lenton Hermitage, Castle Boulevard, Nottingham*. Trent & Peak Archaeological Unit. Unpublished Report.
- Bills, D.W. and Griffiths W.R. 1978. *Kinver Rock Houses*. Kinver. Elda Publications.
- Bright, W. 1830. *Survey of Kinver*. Staffordshire RO D.891/3
- Campbell, F.E. 1963. *Medieval Kinver and its Neighbourhood*.
- Clarke, R. 2006. *Holy Austin Rock; From Ruin to Restoration*.
- Clay, Rotha, M. 1913. *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*.
- Gilley, G. 1991. the Old Red Sandstone in Wolverley. *Journal of the Wolverley and Cookley Historical Society*. **2**. 6-12.
- Grazebrook, G. 1919. *A Short History of Stourton Castle and the Royal Forest of Kinver*. London. Mitchell Hughes and Clarke.
- Greenslade, M.W. (Ed). 1984. *A History of the County of Stafford Volume XX*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Heely, J. (1777) *A Description of the Beauties of Hagley, Envill and the Leasowes*. Birmingham. M.Swinney.
- Hodges, P. 2017. *Kinver Edge and the Rock Houses, Centenary Guide*. National Trust.
- James, K. 2023. The Norman Forest of Kinver: An Analysis of the Forest's Extent and Place-Names Recorded In the Great Perambulation of 1300. *Transactions of the Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society*. **54**.
- Pathe News. 1931. *Dwellers in Caves!* Newsreel footage of Holy Austin Rock.
- Redvers-Higgins, N., Wain, I. and Willis, L. 2011. *Finished Labour of a Thousand Hands; The Archaeology of Combe Down Stone Mines, Bath, Somerset*. Oxford Archaeology Monograph.
- Robinson, D. 1980. *The geography of Augustinian settlement in medieval England and Wales*. British Archaeological Reports, British Series.
- Roth, F. 1966. *The English Austin Friars 1249-1356 I: History*. New York. Cassiciacum. 2 vols.

- Shapland, M. 2020. *Saint Catherine's Hill Cave, Guildford, Surrey, Cave Fabric Record and Archaeological Excavation* Archaeology South East. Unpublished report
- Shoesmith, R. 1993. *Rock-Cut Dwellings, Holy Austin Rock, Kinver, Staffordshire. Volume 3, The Report*. City of Hereford Archaeology Unit.
- Simons, E. *In preparation*. The British Rock-Cut Buildings Project. Vol. 1.
- Simons, E. 2019. *Historic and Archaeological Evidence for Heathland on Kinver Edge, Staffs*. Unpublished Client Report for the National Trust.
- Waltham, A. 1996. *Sandstone Caves of Nottingham*. East Midlands Geological Society.
- Willets, M. 2010. *Living on the edge; the social and economic culture of the rock house communities in Kinver from 1700 to 1963*. unpublished MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham.

Edmund Simons FSA
Edmund.Simons@rau.ac.uk