

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT AND A 'LOST CAVE' IN THE AVON GORGE

by

R.M. TAVINER, A. BOYCOTT[†] AND G.J. MULLAN

ABSTRACT

A cave on the northern side of the Black Rock in the Avon Gorge, Bristol, has been identified as the cave painted by J.M.W. Turner and visited by Robert Southey in the late 18th century. The cave was later (1805) used as a hideout for a gang of local thieves, at which point it was known as St John's Hole.

INTRODUCTION

Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement which originated at the end of the 18th century and had its peak in the first half of the 19th century. The movement was characterised by an emphasis on emotion as a source of aesthetic experience and as a strong motivation for its participant artists and writers.

This paper looks at some of the work of two well-known participants in the movement, the artist J.M.W. Turner and the poet Robert Southey and in particular at their use of the Avon Gorge, Bristol, and one of its caves as a source of inspiration in the early part of their careers.

J.M.W. TURNER (1775-1851)

Turner was born in London and educated mainly in the south-east, but in 1791 and again in 1792 he stayed for a while with John Narraway in Bristol (Wilton, 2012). During this time, he produced a number of sketches and paintings of the Avon Gorge. The one discussed here depicts a large cave entrance, painted from the inside (Figure 1). The cave is apparently accessed by a scramble down on the right-hand side (looking out), or by a climb up from the front. Earlier commentators suggested this might be Giant's Cave (also known as St Vincent's Cave and Ghyston Cave), but this would seem to be based more on it being the most obvious hole in the cliffs, rather than on any specific evidence. However, Turner's view of the skyline is clearly taken from somewhere near the downstream edge of Sea Walls and is very similar to the one depicted in a 19th century painting by Samuel Jackson. Both paintings feature an obvious headland projecting out into the Bristol Channel, which is undoubtedly the northern end of the hill in Portishead situated between Battery Point and the entrance to Portishead Marina and topped by Eastwood Nature Reserve. This is not visible from Giant's Cave. The Jackson work appears to have been painted from a position slightly higher than Turner's location and was presumably painted from the Sea Walls, from a spot more or less directly above Turner's cave.

There are two known caves in this area today. One, River Bend House Cave (Taviner, 2019, p45), is located some metres immediately below the public conveniences at the end of the Sea Wall. The second is named Desecrator Cave by Lewis (1963) and Taviner (2019, p45) after



Figure 1. *Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), The Mouth of the Avon, near Bristol, seen from Cliffs below Clifton, 1791-1792.*

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the climbing route which passes through its entrance, but is also called Unknown Cave, after the climbers' name for this area of cliffs (Lewis, 1975). The problem in associating Turner's work with either of these two caves is that the area was significantly altered by quarrying work carried out between 1836 and 1877. Neither of them now have an entrance anything as impressive as that painted by Turner.

However, works by other artists shed more light on the identification of Turner's cave. An aquatint attributed to J.H. Clark and M. Dubourg dated 1809 (Figure 2) shows a view looking upstream with the cave entrance in the foreground. This view can be identified by the course of the river, the buildings of the New Hotwell which is now variously called St Andrew's Well or St Vincent's Spring, (Taviner, 2019) in the middle distance, and the Observatory on Clifton Down in the far distance. This observation is confirmed by a further engraving, from the first quarter of the 19th century but otherwise unattributed, (Figure 3) which shows the same cave more clearly on the edge of Cook's Folly Wood (see below) and below the Sea Walls¹. It is difficult to photograph a comparable view today, as the downstream side of the

¹ The name 'Sea Walls' (earlier 'Sea Wall') apparently did not apply to the steep cliffs left after the closure of Black Rock Quarry but to the wall built around their upper edge in 1746 by John Wallis (then called Wallis's Wall) for the safety of visitors to the Downs. The cliff is still 'Black Rock' as it was known in the late 18th century. The current usage of 'Sea Walls' to refer to the cliff seems to be a 20th century development.

buttress was much altered by the quarrying and the lower parts are obscured by the wood. But we can state with some confidence that this cave has largely been lost and is now only represented by the remnant known as Desecrator/Unknown Cave.

Both of these early 19th century images show, or at least give a hint of, a second, much smaller cave entrance some metres to the left of the main entrance. It is possible that this might be River Bend House Cave.



Figure 2. *The Black Rock near the Hot Wells Bristol.* Aquatint engraving by John Heaviside Clark and Dubourg Matthew after Samuel Anstie. 1809.

ROBERT SOUTHEY (1774-1843)

The poet, later Poet Laureate, Robert Southey was a contemporary of Turner but, unlike him, was a native of Bristol. He spent much of his time in and around this area, as he stated in a letter:

Letter 3297. Robert Southey to Caroline Bowles, 21 May 1819

Bristol is my native place, & the first imagery which I ever drew from nature was from the rocks & woods about Clifton. There was (& probably still is) not far from Cook's Folly a horse block upon the Down, close to the wall, – a point from whence strangers look down upon the river & the opposite woods. Immediately under that horse block is a little cave overhung with ivy, – the access to which I should probably find difficult now, – but

when I was between fifteen & eighteen many & many are the verses which I wrote in that cave. One of my schoolfellows seemed at that time to have an inclination for poetry, almost as decided as my own; – we called ourselves Nisus & Euryalus,² – & the former of these names I cut in the rock, where I used to take my seat..



Figure 3. *The Black Rock. View looking up the Avon. Unknown attribution, dated to the first quarter of the 19th century.*

One of these poems³ serves to illustrate:

For a CAVERN that overlooks the River AVON.

ENTER this cavern Stranger! The ascent
Is long and steep and toilsome; here awhile
Thou mayest repose thee, from the noontide heat
O'ercanopied by this arch'd rock that strikes
A grateful coolnefs: clasping its rough arms
Round the rude portal, the old ivy hangs

² In Publius Vergilius Maro (70–19 BC), *Aeneid*, Book 9, lines 168–459, Nisus is a follower of Aeneas and famed for his loyalty to his friend Euryalus. Southey referred to himself as ‘Nisus’ in a few of his early poems, for example, ‘To Ignorance’, Southey to Charles Collins, [c. 16 April 1792], *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey. Part One, Letter 6*; and ‘To Lycon’, Southey to Horace Walpole Bedford, 22–[24] December 1793, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey. Part One, Letter 76*. ‘Euryalus’ was probably Grosvenor Charles Bedford, as Southey indicates he was a friend from Westminster School with an ‘inclination for poetry’ that was not sustained.

³ ‘For a Cavern that Overlooks the River Avon’ was first published in Southey’s *Poems* (Bristol, 1797), pp. 57–58. Southey’s ‘Catalogue of His Juvenile Poems’, at Keswick Museum and Art Gallery, contains no fewer than ten poems with titles such as ‘Cave’, ‘To the Cave’ and ‘In the Cave’

Its dark green branches down, and the wild Bees,
 O'er its grey blofforns murmuring ceaseless, make
 Most pleasant melody. No common spot
 Receives thee, for the Power who prompts the fong,
 Loves this secluded haunt. The tide below
 Scarce sends the sound of waters to thine ear ;
 And this high-hanging foreft to the wind
 Varies its many hues. Gaze Stranger here !
 And let thy soften'd heart intensely feel
 How good, how lovely, Nature! When from hence
 Departing to the City's crowd'd streets,
 Thy sickening eye at every step revolts
 From scenes of vice and wretchedness; reflect
 That Man creates the evil he endures .

The details of Southey's letters and poems, including the footnotes, are given here by kind permission of Lynda Pratt and Ian Packer, co-editors of the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey* (Packer and Pratt, 2017).

It is more difficult to identify a site described in text than it is one in illustrations, but Southey has given us sufficient clues in the above letter, to place securely this cave at the south-eastern edge of Cook's Folly Wood, below the wall (Wallis's Wall see footnote 1). We think that the horse block was positioned about where the modern public conveniences are. This evidence may lead us to either Desecrator/Unknown Cave or to River Bend House Cave. To choose between the two relies on Southey's description of his cave as reached by a 'long and steep and toilsome' ascent. This description would seem to fit the former, but may also fit the latter. Clark and Dubourg's image shows a route to the larger cave from below and there is still a winding path from River Bend House Cave to the gorge bottom of the Gorge, although now much overgrown.

Unfortunately, Southey's inscription has not survived, though the initial WT and date 1776 can be seen at Desecrator/Unknown Cave today. There is no such inscription to be seen at River Bend House Cave.

RIVER BEND HOUSE CAVE AND GEORGE CUMBERLAND

In November 2020, Robin Taviner was contacted by K. Jane Evans, former curator of Weston-super-Mare Museum, who was asking for help to identify several caves in drawings of the Avon Gorge that she had uncovered during her research into George Cumberland (Evans, 2022). As part of this conversation, Jane supplied two works of art. One was a version of the aquatint shown in Figure 2. The second was a watercolour painted by George Cumberland (1754-1848), described as 'A man in a top hat by a cave on a steep hill' (Figure 4). This undoubtedly depicts River Bend House Cave, as its features closely match modern photographs of the cave (Figure 5) and probably dates to the 1820s or possibly the late 1810s, when Cumberland was an active member of the Bristol School of Artists.

The significance of the Cumberland painting is that it clearly shows a level and seemingly well-made path leading to the cave, just as there is today. We are unable to give an exact date for the painting so we cannot be absolutely certain, but Cumberland was active in Bristol prior to the major quarrying work in this area. The modern and early images of the

entrance are quite similar and as the cave is, today, accessed by a reasonably level path from the same direction, from the communal gardens of ‘Seawalls’ a modern apartment block, it does not seem to fit with Southey’s descriptions. It is certainly not the cave painted by Turner.



Figure 4. *Watercolour painting by George Cumberland described as “a man in a top hat by a cave on a steep hill.” Date unknown.*

River Bend House Cave seems to be just outside the area affected by the Black Rock Quarry; the fact that it lies in a different parcel of land, 580 instead of 519, on the 1840s tithe map (see <https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/pinpoint/>) may be significant here, but this area at the northeast edge of Cook’s Folly Wood may have been affected by smaller-scale local stone working, perhaps at an earlier date. The cave itself does not seem to have been affected by quarrying after Cumberland’s time.

ST JOHN’S HOLE

There is a third early 19th century reference to a cave in Cook’s Folly Wood, although this one does not have quite the same romantic appeal. In 1805, four men, Thomas Dowling (aged 13), Issak Dowling (aged 16), David Lane (aged 13) and Charles Coleman (aged 14), were captured and committed to Newgate Prison. They had holed themselves up in a cave identified as ‘St John’s Hole’ that was located in Cook’s Folly Wood according to contemporary reports (*Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, January 31st, 1805; Figure 6). The reports indicate that the cavern must have been quite roomy as they had converted it into a “kind of store room where a plentiful supply of edibles in the form of bacon, ham, cheese, biscuits, etc., were discovered together with a liberal and varied quantity of ales, wines, cigars and liquors!”

(Bristol Magpie, September 31st 1890). It seems that they were cooking when discovered and it was their cooking fire being seen from the opposite side of the Gorge which allowed the police to be tipped off.



Figure 5. *Modern photograph of the entrance to River Bend House Cave, Avon Gorge.*

Photo: G.J. Mullan.

A useful addition comes from Felix Farley's Bristol Journal (February 2nd 1805) which seems to quote the same syndicated source as the Bristol Gazette but also adds: "The Editor of a London print, in noticing the apprehension of these men, makes a curious mistake by asserting that the place of their residence was Giant's Hole, where when taken they were found frying eggs and bacon, &c." It is useful to have this contemporary correction made in a local publication. Giant's Hole, as mentioned above, was the only other obvious cave on the north side of the Avon Gorge at this time. The 'London Print' published prior to February 2nd may have been the Morning Herald (January 28th 1805). The error was, unfortunately copied elsewhere, for example in the Tyne Mercury, Northumberland and Durham and Cumberland Gazette (12th February 1805) and in the Royal Cornwall Gazette (2nd February 1805).

Of the four, Isaak Dowling and Charles Coleman were sentenced to seven years transportation, though Coleman was granted pardon on condition of his entering the army (National Archives, Reference HO 47/38/59, August 28th 1806). It is not known what happened to the two 13-year-olds, although Coleman's 'extreme youth' of 14 years was a factor in his pardon. At this time the age of criminal responsibility was set at seven years (Goldson, 2020).

Committed to Newgate.—Thos. Downing, Isaac Dowling, David Lane, and Charles Coleman, for having feloniously and burglariously broken and entered the dwelling-house of Thomas Norman, of the parish of St. Augustine, and stolen therefrom one pair of leather shoes, value 5s. and several other articles, the property of the said T. Norman. They had converted a cavern in Cook's Folly Wood, called St. John's Hole, into a kind of store-room, which was well stocked with bacon, cheese, &c. and were in the act of cooking a part of their plunder when detected.

Figure 6. *Extract from the Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser, Thursday January 31st 1805.*

River Bend House Cave would not have been large enough for this well-provisioned store room, so it is likely that they were using the cave visited by Southey and Turner. It is something of a come-down from Romantic vista to sleazy hiding place, but it does give us a name for the cave; St John's Hole. It is not known how the site came by the name, but it fits with other similarly named features in the Gorge such as St. Andrew's Well and St Vincent's Cave. Beyond these two sites, there are no other known caves that fit the location in Cook's Folly Wood.

DISCUSSION

The accounts given above all seem to relate to the same cave, situated on the downstream side of Black Rock, below Sea Walls. The question is whether any of them might relate to River Bend House Cave or whether they all refer to the cave which was partially destroyed by the late 19th century quarrying activities.

River Bend House Cave, on the evidence of Cumberland's painting, seems to have been little affected by quarrying after his time. It does not match the site shown in Turner's painting. Neither does the view downstream match, as the headland at Portishead cannot be clearly seen. It could, possibly, be the cave visited by Southey but does not bear his inscription despite other engraved graffiti being visible therein. It is almost certainly not the St John's Hole of the thieves as it is not large enough.

The larger cave visible on the early 19th century images is a much better fit for all of these. Being larger and more open, it fits more closely with Turner's painting. The modern view from Desecrator/Unknown Cave (Figure 7) is a reasonable fit with Turner's view, given



Figure 7. *The view from Desecrator/Unknown Cave (St. John's Hole) in 2024.*

Photo: Ben Morgan.

the changes made by the subsequent quarrying in this area. Turner's cave may have been the place where Southey carved his and his friend's nicknames. If so, these have not survived. There is some surviving graffiti, including the initials 'WT' and a date of 1776, indicating that the cave was accessible in the late 18th century. It is most likely to be the St John's Hole of the thieves. Figure 3 shows that a cooking fire made there would be easily visible from the river banks below. It would seem only right, therefore, to restore the name St. John's Hole, even if the cave itself cannot be restored.

Figure 8 was taken from the west bank of the Gorge in 2011. It clearly shows the relationship between Desecrator/Unknown Cave (St. John's Hole) and River Bend House Cave after the effects of quarrying (cf. Figure 3). The vegetation on the cliffs has since increased.

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Figure 8. *River Bend House Cave and Desecrator/Unknown Cave (St. John's Hole) from the West bank of the Gorge.*

Photo: A. Boycott.

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R.M. Taviner
rtaviner@hotmail.com

A. Boycott
(Deceased)

G.J. Mullan
graham.mullan@coly.org.uk