



# The Hidden History of Burrington Ham



## Caves

Over thousands of years streams flowing over the impermeable sandstone rocks of Black Down onto the permeable limestone rocks of Burrington Combe have worn away cracks in the rocks to produce a series of sink holes known as swallets as well as creating caves. Many of these caves were homes to nomadic humans as well as animals over 10,000 years ago. Caves that are sited on the Ham include Foxes Hole, Lionel's Hole, Milliar's Cave, and Plumley's Hole.

### Foxes Hole

Foxes Hole lies on the north side of the combe approximately 300m further up the valley from the confluence with East Twin Valley and about 12m above road level. There are two entrances, both of them fitted with bat grills as it is an important bat roost. Access is limited to bone-fide cavers. The cave was known as "Plumley's Den" in the 1860s when archaeologist Professor Boyd Dawkins discovered a small number of Pleistocene remains, including reindeer, in the first chamber. Originally there was only one entrance but the lower one was cut by Boyd Dawkins' labourers to assist with his excavation. The cave's former name of Plumley's Den relates to a legend that the cave was used as a hiding place by John Plumley, Lord of the Manor of Locking, after the Monmouth Rebellion. However recent research indicates that although he lived in the Manor House at Locking, he was not Lord of the Manor. Also it was a William, not John, Plumley who was involved in the Rebellion. Information about John Plumley of Plumley's Den is still a mystery.



The cave consists of two chambers connected by a small passage. During the early part of the Second World War an Auxilliary Unit within the Blagdon Home Guard used the cave as a secret base. Auxilliary Units were part of a British resistance organisation made up of local people who knew the area well and who would be able to sabotage any occupying troops. The Blagdon unit, consisting of seven men, constructed a door into the cave and steps down to the lower chamber. They built bunks and shelves and stored food and explosives there in case of a prolonged stay - but weapons were taken home whenever they left. Rotting wood used for making the bunks can still be seen in the cave.

## Lionel's Hole

Originally known as Burrington Hole, it was renamed Lionel's in 1966 after one of the diggers, Lionel Haines. Although cavers first showed interest in this site in 1920 and continued to dig there during the 1930s, 1940s and 1960s, it was not until 1970 that Wessex Cave Club members opened the cave after three days of digging. Further passage has been found since then and it is now about 1km long. A short low entrance tunnel leads to a complex maze of passages making route-finding challenging. There is a low level active streamway above which is a series of chambers and rifts with collapse features. The source of the small stream is not known but it is assumed to flow underground to the springs at either Langford or Rickford (or maybe both, due to the complex system of underground water flow in the Burrington area).



## Milliar's Cave

The cave is in the southern face of a disused quarry, Milliar's Quarry. It lies a short distance east north east of the Burrington Inn. Milliar's Quarry Cave is a steeply dipping narrow tube following the near vertical strata and ends in a loose boulder choke at a depth of 45 feet. It was first entered in 1951 and has been dug intermittently since then. A rope is required to descend the cave.

## Plumley's Hole

The blocked entrance to Plumley's Hole is in the disused quarry opposite the Rock of Ages. It is buried under rubble in a square alcove at the rear of the platform formed by the old lime kiln. It is a natural shaft or fissure discovered during quarrying operations in 1875. The fissure was formed in a bed of softer limestone between two thick beds of harder rock.

The cave is named after Joseph (Joe) Plumley born in or near Burrington parish in about 1820. He lived with his parents at The Link until 1841 but by 1871 was living alone in a small cottage. He worked as a labourer for John Clark, the tenant who rented the quarry and limekiln for a yearly sum of five pounds. The quarry was rented from the Duke of Cleveland and a local builder. In mid-December 1874 a deep natural shaft was encountered during quarrying but due to severe weather was not explored until early January 1875. Almost half a metre of snow fell, there were three metre drifts and, on New Year's Eve, a temperature of 26° Fahrenheit (-3.3° Centigrade) was recorded. On Tuesday 5th January when conditions improved Joe Plumley decided to investigate, probably during late afternoon/early evening after quarry work was finished. Plumley's fellow workmen lowered him down the shaft on a rope reportedly tied around his thigh and chest (a simple bosun's chair as commonly used by miners at that time). After a while the men at

the top attempted to pull him up. There are conflicting reports as to whether Plumley had signalled them to do so, or whether the men became worried when they could not see him but, tragically, he became jammed and they could not pull him beyond a certain point. At about midnight the rescue attempt was abandoned. Two newspaper reports state that George Clark went down the shaft that evening for about 45 feet (13.7metres)/20 yards (18 metres) but did not reach Plumley, although the inquest did not mention this attempt.

The morning after the accident a number of people gathered at the cave and George Clark volunteered to descend the cave, finding Plumley's body after about 30 yards (27 metres), with his head jammed against a projecting rock. The inquest was held in Burrington Schoolroom on Saturday 9th January and a verdict of accidental death was recorded. The death certificate, dated 12th January 1875 stated cause of death to be "Hanging. Caused by a rope . . . .shifting and fastening itself around his neck accidentally while descending a pit leading to a cavern in Burrington Combe". Joseph Plumley is buried in Burrington Churchyard. Following the accident the shaft was blocked at a depth of about 60 feet (18 metres) and subsequently cart loads of rubble and a tree stump were dumped into the entrance.

Between 1890-1900 the cave was visited by local cave explorer Herbert Balch who may or may not have descended the shaft. Another caver, Ernest Baker, did descend between 1903-1906 but did not write a description. Later, between 1912-14, Bristol Speleological Research Society dug out some of the rubble (and a large tree trunk) to a depth of about 40 feet (12.2 metres). A little more clearing was carried out in 1919-20 by members of the University of Bristol Speleological Society and the cave was descended by Professor Tratman. He used a handline for the descent, the shaft being influenced by the 70° dip of the limestone strata. He recorded that a small ledge occurred at about 30 feet (9 metres) depth and it is possible this could have been responsible for snagging the rope holding Joe Plumley. The site was abandoned due to problems with falling stones and in 1924 the shaft was capped with a manhole cover and sealed with concrete. It was reopened in 1946 for a short time before being re-sealed with a concrete slab.



*Plumley's Hole*