



The Hidden History of Burrington Ham



Geology

Burrington Combe was created during periglacial periods over the past 1.2 million years. During these periods permafrost blocked the caves which drained the area, and meltwater flowed on the surface carving the gorge. Today Burrington Combe provides a well-exposed section through the complete Carboniferous Limestone sequence (359 to 259 million years ago). Starting with the Oxwich Head Limestone (the youngest rocks in the sequence and visible in Milliar's Quarry), it continues through the Clifton Down formation, the Burrington Oolite (of which the "Rock of Ages" crag is formed), to the Black Rock Limestone and Lower Limestone Shale. The fact that these formations are visible side-by-side rather than one on top of another, as they were laid down, is due to the uplift and folding of the rocks of the area at the end of the Carboniferous period. This created a range of steep mountains, which were then eroded down over hundreds of millions of years to give us the Mendip Hills of today.



Carboniferous Limestone exposed in Burrington Combe. Note the steeply sloping bedding of the rock.

The underlying geology of Burrington Ham is the Carboniferous Limestone formations mentioned above. However, on the wooded north edge of the Ham these are overlaid with younger Dolomitic Conglomerate rock. This was formed in the Triassic Period from small fragments of Carboniferous Limestone and finer-grained sediment, and its soil is a distinctive red colour.

Since the early 19th century the exposed formations and caves of Burrington Combe have been a magnet for leading geologists, including William Boyd Dawkins, William Aveline, and Henry de la Beche.



Some of the types of rock found on Burrington Ham: Top left: Black Rock Limestone. Top: right: Burrington Oolite. Bottom left: Oxwich Head Limestone. Bottom right: Dolmitic Conglomerate.