



## Aveline's Hole

On Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> January 1797, two boys chased a rabbit down a hole in Burrington Combe. Not wanting to lose it, they widened the hole that it had disappeared down and discovered one of the most important archaeological finds to date. Early reports suggested that there were between 70 and 100 skeletons lying on the floor of the cave. The cave was excavated and the entrance enlarged in 1860 by William Boyd Dawkins who named it after his tutor William Talbot Aveline.

However, by 1914, when the University of Bristol Speleological Society (UBSS) began excavating the site, only the remains of 21 individuals were found. It is likely however that the original estimates were close as there were over 100 years of people visiting the caves and removing bones as "souvenirs" of their visit.

The bones were taken to Bristol, where they were displayed in the UBSS museum, only to suffer extensive bomb damage in November 1940. Most of the collection plus all the excavation records were tragically destroyed.

Modern radiocarbon analysis of the remaining fragments has confirmed that the human bones date roughly from 10,200 to 10,400 years ago. This makes it the oldest cemetery in the British Isles.

It is now believed that the Aveline's Hole people came from the Mendip Hills area, based on the levels of strontium found in their remains and the local environment.

The analysis has indicated that the adults in the group, which also included young children and two infants, were only about five feet tall and slightly built. They appeared to have died relatively young, as few molars show the extreme wear to be expected from elderly hunter-gatherers' teeth. As well as signs of osteoarthritis in an elbow, scientists have spotted lines in teeth indicating repeated periods of poor nutrition, probably linked to periods where food was scarce, or chronic illness in childhood.

There were signs of iron deficiency and little evidence of fish in their diet - even fresh water varieties, which isn't surprising as Aveline's Hole would have been much further from the sea than it is now. Britain had not long been released from the grip of extensive ice cover. Although the world's oceans were rising, it is thought there was still a land corridor between the UK and France, and the local people would have been able to walk directly north, across what is now the Bristol Channel, to Wales.

A series of inscribed crosses found on the wall of Aveline's Hole are believed to date from the early Mesolithic period just after the Ice Age. The pattern is said to be comparable with others known from Northern France, Germany and Denmark" making this a site of international importance. A gate has been installed in the cave to protect the engraving, after consultations between English Heritage and other interested parties, including the landowner and English Nature.

As well as human remains over 100 different types of animal remains were found in Aveline's hole. These included Brown Bear, Great Red Deer, Arctic Fox, Reindeer, Lynx, Wolf and Auroch or Bison.

