

A HITHERTO UNKNOWN ACCOUNT OF A LATE 18th CENTURY VISIT TO THE SPEEDWELL MINE AT CASTLETON BY JAMES PLUMPTRE

Trevor Ford

Several late 18th century accounts of descents via mine shafts and caverns to the stream caverns in the inner reaches of the Speedwell Cavern have been known for many years. The caverns described in some detail by Pilkington (1789) were rediscovered by Richard Shaw climbing from the bottom of the series though the surface shaft is blocked (Shaw 1983). Accounts by Bray (1777), Sullivan (1780) and Hatchett (1796, in Raistrick, 1967) suggest that there was another route down from the hill top but they do not give enough detail to be sure. The problem has been discussed by Rieuwerts and Ford (1985, Marsden (1991) and Ford (1991).

A visit was also made by James Plumptre, newly graduated from Cambridge, on Saturday, August 24th 1793, but his manuscript diary lay hidden until recently. The bulk of Plumtre's diaries have recently been published with some commentary by Ian Ousby (1992) and the extract relevant to the Speedwell Mine has been published in full with comments by the writer in *Cave Science*, Volume 191 No. 2, 1992). In view of the interest relating to Castleton's mining history some short extracts and comments are presented here.

After visiting Peak Cavern, Plumptre and his colleague John Dudley went to the Speedwell at 4 o'clock. He noted "great quantities of lead ore ready for smelting" at the entrance. At that time only New Rake was recorded as producing any lead ore. Miners were then coming out from work, including "women who wore breeches". Two miners acted as guides, taking with them a bottle of brandy as a protection against the cold! After going down the steps they traversed the canal, here said to be 7 feet high and 4 feet wide - the height is reasonable but the width was underestimated. He said "the miners have 5 guineas for every two yards", a figure which agrees with other records. After 600 yards (actually about 500) they came to "a large natural cavern . . . waterfall from an artificial dam . . . a sluice": this can only be the Bottomless Pit Cavern and it is interesting that he does not mention getting out of the boat; indeed it is logical that there was an aqueduct instead of today's platform. Some 250 yards further they came to "another fall" - this must be the cascade down the Bung Hole. 150 yards further they came "to the end of navigation where we chained our boat to a rail" - at what is today known as the Whirlpool.

The two "tourists" then "proceeded upon planks laid on rafters over the stream" . . . "stooping almost all the way". The stemple holes for these rafters can still be seen in the walls of the Main Stream Passage. "At the end of this boardway we got to a small cavern and the miners told us that we might . . . proceed by climbing ten yards up the rock by rails sometimes a yard asunder". This climb must have been up past the chokes above the Boulder Piles, halfway up the Main Stream Passage. As there is no mention of Cliff Cavern etc. they evidently did not go beyond the

Boulder Piles. They "got into a large cavern" shaped like a bee-hive and climbed a further forty yards on stemples and then scrambled through holes "just big enough to admit the body". There was a waterfall dashing down the cavern - there is only a heavy drip today at the Boulder Piles.

Plumptre and his friend "went on slanting up the rock for a further ten yards to the place they worked at". After refreshing themselves with brandy the miners showed them how the ore was got by blasting. The smell of smoke and gunpowder was unpleasant. "There was another way out by climbing 150 yards farther to the top of the hill; but as the way led through another man's mine, the miners never go by it". This seems likely to have been James Hall's Engine shaft explored by the Technical Speleological Unit in 1963.

Plumptre and his companion returned by the same route, commenting on the difficulty of descending by "stakes fixed to the sides sloping inwards" and on worn ladders "with only a slight balustrade". The miners were said to go up without lights! They returned to the surface after a visit lasting two hours, a fairly high speed trip even by modern standards.

The last section of the above account, from the Boulder Piles upwards, describes caverns and mine workings long surmised to exist but which have not been accessible in modern times. It seems very likely that Plumptre's Cavern is the same as that visited by Bray, Sullivan and Hatchett, and it is quite distinct from Pilkington's Cavern. Plumtre's Cavern is fairly close to Stemple Highway in the Far Sump Extension of Peak Cavern (Cordingley and Farr 1981) and some branch off it may have been the old miners' route into Stemple Highway.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Nigel Ball, John Cordingley, John Gunn, Tony Marsden, Jim Rieuwerts and Clive Westlake for their comments; to Roy Paulson for drawing my attention to it and to Ian Ousby for his co-operation.

REFERENCES

- Bray, W. 1777 *Sketch of a tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire*. London, also 2nd edition 1783.
- Cordingley, J.N. and Farr, M.J. 1981 Peak Cavern extensions. *Caves & Caving* No. 12, pp.10-12.
- Ford, T.D. 1991 Problems of interpretation of the Speedwell's Mining History. *Cave Science*, Vol. 18, No.1, pp. 36-39.
- Marsden, A.W. 1991 Aspects of the Peak-Speedwell Cave System, 1650-1900. *Cave Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp.3-17.
- Ousby, I. 1992 *James Plumtre's Britain: the journals of a tourist in the 1790s*. Hutchinson, London. 248pp.
- Pilkington, J. 1789 *A View of the Present State of Derbyshire*. Derby 2 Volumes, 469 and 464pp.
- Raistrick, A. 1967 *The Haichett Diary of 1796*. Bradford Barton, Truro.
- Rieuwerts, J.H. and Ford, T.D. 1985 The mining history of the Speedwell Mine or Oakden Level, Castleton, Derbyshire. *Bull.PDMHS*, Vol. 9, No.3, pp.129-170.
- Shaw, R.P. 1983a Rediscovery of the lost Pilkington's Cavern, Castleton. *Trans. BCRA.*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.1-8.
- Shaw, R.P. 1983b Pilkington's Cavern, Castleton. *Bull.PDMHS*. Vol. 8, No.5, pp.296-300.
- Sullivan, R. 1780 *Observations made during a tour through parts of England, Scotland and Wales*. London, 247pp. (2nd edition in two volumes 1785).

Trevor D.Ford.