

AN ACCOUNT OF A VISIT BY JOHN RENNIE TO PEAK CAVERN

Transcribed from the original documents
by Robert B. Matkin

John Rennie (1761 to 1821) kept observations of various engineering projects he visited on his journeys about the Country in a series of 99 notebooks. These notebooks, now housed in the National Library of Scotland, are being transcribed with the aid of a Royal Society Research Grant. The following account appears in notebook number one. Rennie made very little distinction in his notebooks where sentences began or ended and some punctuation etc. has been added to make the account readable. Similarly a few words have had to be added and these are enclosed in brackets. The first paragraph clearly refers to Coalpithole Mine.

May 16th 1784

I this morning about 11 o'clock AM left Manchester and proceeded to Stockport and from that to Castletown between and which I passed Sparrow Pit where I saw an Engine for raising of water from a Lead Mine. This Engine had too large water wheels, apparently about 26 or 27 feet diar, the one below the other so that the water which came from the one answered to drive the other, and they both had a spur wheel fixed to their edge which acted on one common Pinion which was fixed on a Crank which worked two Levers and consequently two Pumps. These spur wheels were just the same size as the water wheels and the water was conveyed away from the wheel by a subterraneous passage to a deep Valley where it ran for some distance and then went below a Mountain. This mine produced (although not in very great quantities) a very rich Ore. I left this and went on to Castletown through a very lonely road but when I arrived within a mile of it, what was my surprise when I espied a road equally steep as the Pics in Scotland and surrounded by the most Stupenducus rocks I ever saw, Some of them, although high, had a smooth surface and others hanging as it were over their foundations and almost struck a terror in the Traveller least they should fall.

When at the foot of this [hill] I espied the village of Castletown standing on a small but pleasant plane, mostly inclosed with hedges and trees and seemed to be very well cultivated. But casting my eye around I saw nothing but stupenduous mountains which formed, as it were, a Bason. On the south side of this valley, upon a precipice stands an Old Castle very much in ruins and just below it is the Cavern called the Devils Arse. This cavern is perhaps the largest subterraneous excavation in Europe. There is a man whose sole business is to show it and who makes a good deal of money by it. I applied to this man to conduct me into the cave which he very readily agreed to. I in company with him went towards the cave and was very much struck at my approach to in An imense hollow in the Rock first appeared and then the mouth of the cave. This Rock I am told is about 260 feet high. The cave is 42 ft high, 120 ft wide and 270 long. It contracts almost to a point on which is a door. Between [here] and the outside is a Rope Manufactory and two dwelling houses. I went through the door and came in to a pretty large cave surrounded with petrifications one of which my conductor called the Flitch of Bacon. I must allow, it very much resembles one. I advanced about 150 yards and came to a River about 50 ft broad. Here my conductor Launched a small boat in which he caused me to stretch myself and ferried me across the River. This brought to my remembrance my old Friend Charon who ferries the Traveller over the Styx in Hell.

The Roof above this River was very low but pretty Regular and there is a petrifying water which incrusts it over so quickly that they are obliged to blow it to give Room for the people to get to the inner caves. As soon as I landed on the inner banks of Styx, I espied an amasing large Cavern about 120 ft high in the Roof, although in some places it is said to go up to the surface and smoke is said to have come out of it. Its width is about 210 feet and length 270.

At the end of this cavern is another River which is about 30 ft broad. A little distance from the inner bank [of] this River is a continual fall of water from a Cave, like Rain, from whence it is called Roger Rains house. A little further in still, appears a set of Singer at a distance of about 50 feet above you. This is a Cave which has an entrance from one of the outer ones and from the sides of the entrance to this cave is severaly which go in different directions where there is an amazing quantity of Petrified Stones mostly white and in the form of Columns. A little further in you come to sand hill which is raised there by the River, which is said to be brought from a distance of at least 4 miles where this River sinks in to a mountain and where if saw dust is put in it, is lodged upon this bank.

From this bank you descend down a declivity of about 140 feet (I should have [said] that at the head of this descent is what is called the Devils Cellar) at the under end of which is a kind of sand down which a small Rivulet sinks and comes out again nearer the mouth. This is just halfway to the inner end of what is discovered.

On Crossing this Rivulet, you come to a long passage where their is three partes in the Rock like arches and as Regular as if they were cut by the hand. When you cross this, you hear a noise of a fall of water or cascade. The noise of this is much increased by the echo of the cave, for on approaching it the noise decreases. Beyond this is a cave like a Bell and has got the name of Tom of Lincolns Bell, being so like the Bell of that name.

You proceed on to various caves of different forms and heights, crossing no less that 7 times the second subterraneous Rivulet. At the extremity of this cave, the Rock almost closes with the water, but the person who shows the cave has made some attempts by blowing the Rock to get further in and perhaps to discover another cave. But although he had advanced a good way yet he has not got one. The Rock that he has blown is of a kind of Black Marble with various white and rather gray spots in it.

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