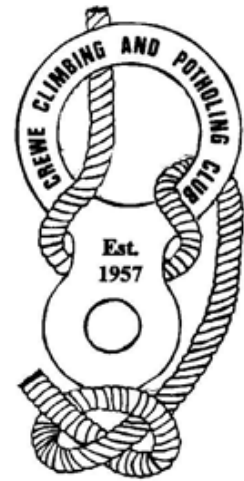




C.C.P.C. Newsletter 123 June 2020

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Editorial:

The March 2020 Newsletter started with:

'By the time this Newsletter reaches you, everything we have grown to accept as 'normal' will have changed, as the **Coronavirus** takes hold in just about every part of the world. Our particular leisure activities will be 'on hold', as we try to get through the next weeks, or months, without becoming ill, or spreading the illness to others. Our national caving and mountaineering organisations have joined those from other parts of the world in asking that all such activities cease until this most serious situation is past. Consequently, there will be no club social or business meetings, or trips, on the hills, or under them, for the foreseeable future. We will look forward to better times ahead.

Keep safe everyone, and use Social Media, telephone, e-mail, or whatever, to keep in touch'.

Now, three months later, the June 2020 Newsletter version:

Well, the March statement just about sums the situation up. Caving is still, very much, 'on hold'. None of the CCPC meetings, and caving trips planned for April and May, have taken place, and June will probably be the same. Our Monthly Meetings have been taking place **on-line**, via 'Skype', on the first Monday of each month – excellent effort.

All DCRO training sessions and meetings involving contact between individuals have been abandoned, and many team members have had to 'step back' due to personal vulnerability, however DCRO remains ready to assist if called upon to do so – clearly, procedures are in place to protect team members and individuals needing help, and to sanitise equipment. Fortunately, most cavers are following the guidance, and are resisting the urge to get underground, and in any case, many landowners have chosen to close access, so there have been few calls for Cave Rescue (I believe). On-line training has now been tried - very successfully, using 'Zoom' – and is continuing.

More than ten weeks have passed since this lock-down began, and no doubt everyone else is as frustrated as I am. We all want to get back to normal – caving, climbing, canoeing, walking, etc. - but this situation is far from over. These are extraordinary times. Casualty numbers due to the virus have been horrendous, and new infections are reported daily, and the number of deaths reported daily continues to shock us all.

There has been some e-mail discussion lately, concerning the risk (or not) of some limited caving activities. Each person must make up their own mind about what is acceptable, but the 'official' advice is still to remain at least 2 metres apart from any other individual, even outside, in the open.

As one member (NHS – front line, essential worker) e-mailed:

'... the covid-19 virus today is the same as the one two months ago, and it is still killing people'.

The caves will be there when this is all over. We have to do our best to make sure that we are too.

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With no Club caving taking place, and no contributions from Members, you will have to put up with this slightly different Newsletter this month. To avoid more of my ramblings, you need to write something yourself !!! Anything welcome.
Steve Knox.

Sandstone Caves of the Bickerton Hills in Cheshire:

1. **Mad Allen's Hole**, nr. Bickerton (alternatively: **Allenscomb's Cave**).

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 503 536
Latitude: 53° 4' 36.95" N
Longitude: 2° 44' 31.08" W



The sandstone cave on Bickerton Hill, today generally called **Mad Allen's Hole**, is sometimes identified as being 'Allenscomb's Cave', described in an 1809 pamphlet as the home of John Harris, 'the English Hermit'. The pamphlet seems to be the primary source for all subsequent accounts.

['A Full Account of Mr. John Harris the English hermit – now residing in a cave in a Rock, known by the name of Allenscomb's cave, near to the town of Harthill'.]

Left: Approaching Mad Allen's Hole from the south-west.
[Photo: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]

The basic story:

John Harris was born in 1710 in the Parish of Handley, and owned, or would inherit, several estates, however his parents would not give him permission to marry Miss Ann Edgerton, the girl he loved, so he went off to live in the woods on his own ! He started his wild-man existence in a sandstone cave in Carden Park, staying there for about twenty years, until sometime in the 1760s when he moved to Allenscomb's Cave.

While living in Carden Park Cave he was often 'displayed' to guests on the estate as a curiosity, and it may have been that attention which eventually persuaded him to relocate. 18th century material has been excavated from the Carden Park Cave, indicating occupation by 'someone' during that period. He supposedly occupied his new cave home for sixty-six years.

As expected, the numbers don't add up : born 1710 ... lived at Carden for 20 years until 1765 (?), so about 55 years old then ... lived at Allenscomb for 66 years, so he must have been about 121 years old by then, - and still living in 1809 aged 99 years !!!!

The pamphlet account mentions that John Harris had a manservant, who lived with him for almost fifty years, and that a number of gentlemen from the area regularly visited him in his cave, so there may be other reasons for his remote and discrete lifestyle.



Visiting today:

Mad Allen's Hole can be found easily by following the Sandstone Trail footpath uphill from the parking area by Bickerton Church. After a sandstone outcrop, look for a fork in the path and keep right, looking out for a narrow path branching off to the right after about 20 yards. This will lead down to the base of a sandstone cliff where the cave is located behind a number of huge blocks which were probably once a massive overhang, now collapsed.

There are two openings, one above the other, with a connection via a circular hole at the back of the cave, but a short ladder would have been needed to allow easy access from one level to the other. No evidence has been located to positively confirm occupation of the site during the

eighteenth century.

Above: The upper and lower chambers of Mad Allen's Hole. [Photo: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]



Above: Looking down into the lower chamber from 'the bridge'.

Left: The upper chamber of Mad Allen's Hole.

[Photos: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]

2. 'Carved Cave', by Mad Allen's Hole, nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 503 536



Above: Approaching 'Carved Cave' from Mad Allen's Hole, to the south-west.
[Photo: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]

This sandstone cave on Bickerton Hill, is only a few metres away from **Mad Allen's Hole** (see above), and is easily identified by the macabre carvings on the walls. The cave is only about 2 metres high and wide, and 2 metres in length. [Its correct name is unknown.]



Above: Details of the skull, or face carvings in 'Carved Cave'. Penknife for scale.
[Photos: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]

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3. Un-named cave, by Mad Allen's Hole, nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 503 536



Above: The un-named cave from Mad Allen's Hole to the north east.
[Photo: 19-04-2011. Colin Knox]

This eroded outcrop on Bickerton Hill, is typical of many sites on the west facing slopes of this sandstone ridge. Only a few metres away are **Mad Allen's Hole** and the '**Carved Cave**' (see above). Like other similar features, the cave is barely more than a blind hollow eroded by the wind, but may have been modified by man. Its correct name is unknown.

4. 'Musket's Hole', nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 50800 54539



Above: 'Musket's Hole Cave', from below.

[Photo: 25-08-2019. Colin Knox]

I have been unable to discover anything about the origin of the name of this feature (– it is labelled as such on the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey map).

The cave can be found most easily by descending the long flight of steps which mark the concessionary footpath from the Sandstone Trail edge path, starting about 300 metres south of Rawhead Trig Point, down towards Moss Farm.

The path descends into a wooded, steep-sided 'ravine', and the cave is in the exposed sandstone outcrop on the right (north) side, just as the path starts to level out.

Access is via a short 'ladder' of deeply worn footholds up the smooth sandstone wall, leading directly into the single, west-facing chamber. Ignoring the modern graffiti, it is still easy to see that the cavity has been greatly modified by man, with a levelled floor, and a square cross-section chimney cut to daylight at the western end. There are various cut ledges and sockets which may possibly have supported a timber structure intended to close off the open front of the chamber from wind and weather.

When I was there, previous visitors had left a swivel-type office chair, a wooden dining chair, a plastic bucket, and a crumpled boiler suit, plus the usual selection of bottles and cans which seem to be commonplace in these caves.



'Musket's Hole', east end.



'Musket's Hole', chimney shaft.



'Musket's Hole', entrance steps.

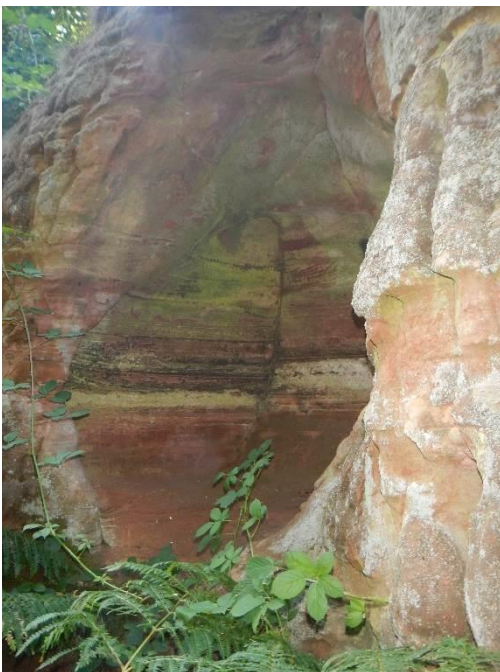
[Photos: 25-08-2019.Colin Knox]

5. Un-named cave near 'Musket's Hole Cave', nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 50745 54657



Above: The un-named 'cave', between 'Musket's Hole' and Raw Head.



This feature looks very cave-like from a distance, and particularly from the top of the adjacent sandstone cliff-top, where it appears to be a dark tunnel entrance.

The location is easily found by following the green track running north below 'Musket's Hole' (see above) into the opening of the second 'ravine' feature. The 'cave' turned out to be no more than a deep, circular, wind-eroded pocket, about 2 metres high by 1.5 metres wide, and about 1.5 metres deep, in the face of a sandstone cliff, accessed by a struggle up a steep slope, through massively tangled briars.

Left: The eroded pocket.

[Photos: 25-08-2019.Colin Knox]



6. 'Bloody Bones Cave' / 'Raw head Cave', nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 50836 54835



Above: Heather Simpson at the main opening into 'Bloody Bones Cave'.

This cave is situated on the west side of the ridge, just below, and within sight of, the Raw Head trig point. It comprises one main chamber with a number of alcoves or bays, some with silted up arches which probably lead either to other small cavities, or to choked entrances at the other side of the outcrop. The cave was 'supposedly' once the haunt of brigands !



Left: One of the choked entrances (not proven) on the northern side of the sandstone outcrop containing 'Bloody Bones Cave'.

[- no, that is not a body, but can you tell who it is ??? - Heather will know.]

[Photos: 25-08-2019.Colin Knox]

7. 'Queen's Parlour Cave', nr. Bickerton.

OS Sheet: 117 SJ 51068 55201



Above: The single entrance to 'Queen's Parlour Cave'.

This is the largest, and most impressive, of the caves to be found along the west-facing escarpment of Bickerton Hill. It is situated a short distance below the main edge path which leads north-east from Raw Head, and is accessed by an easy scramble down an earth slope (the remains of timber fronted steps can be seen in several places), with the starting point marked by a substantial wooden post.

Inside, an extensive chamber stretches away into the near-darkness at the furthest limits, with a number of sandstone pillars and alcoves around the sides.



Left: Another view of the entrance to 'Queen's Parlour Cave'.

[Photos: 21-03-2008. Colin Knox]



Left: Looking across the main chamber of 'Queen's Parlour' from near the entrance.



Left: Side alcoves and supporting pillars. Soot deposits can be seen on the walls from campfires.



Left: One of the pillars left close to the side wall of the chamber.

On a recent visit (2019) there was considerably more graffiti on the walls.

[Photos: 21-03-2008.Colin Knox]

The origin, and age, of the name 'Queen's parlour' is unknown.

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Colin Knox.

Why write about Sandstone Caves ?

The previous item was prompted by a recent DCRO call-out to assist in a missing person search in the Bickerton area of Cheshire. It seems that few DCRO team members are familiar with the area and its selection of modest caves, but as it is not far from my home, Annie and I occasionally walk there, and I knew (or at least, I thought I knew) the locations of all the 'known' caves. As it turned out one of the locations previously identified to me by a dog-walking 'local', was incorrect, and I happily misled those searching with me. At least now, I do know all of the locations listed here, although I need to revisit them with a decent GPS to confirm the grid references.

Sadly, the body missing person was discovered some considerable time later, and well outside our designated search area.

Exploring Locally:

One of our Members. Gaz Mcshee has been investigating a hole, located while dog-walking locally, on Congleton Edge:

'It wasn't big, and a lot had been filled in but it was super interesting. I am pretty sure it's a whetstone mine. I had heard a rumour of the mine, and had spent a few trips looking for it. I have no wish to go back as it was a death trap, but it's a very interesting bit of local history. The actual working looks like it extends out under the road but has been filled in, you can see the props disappearing into the distance through a gap of about six inches where the fill has settled. The up-dip side can't be any more than three feet below the surface.'

Nigel Cooper added:

The place is an old Ganister working, on a smaller scale than the ones on the Mow side of the road. The road up from Astbury to the edge, is known locally as Ganny Bank – short for ganister!

The stuff in the bit you found was almost pure silica (I've heard) and fetched a good price, as it was used in steel and pottery refractories. The workings on the Mow side of Ganny Bank were much more extensive and the loading gantry is still visible on the right, near the top of the bank as you go up. Most of the main workings are collapsed but there's a bit visible below the concrete incline, that descends the open cut behind the gantry. Back to the Congleton side of the road, there is quite a large cave like entrance uphill from the bit you found. This was a working for cobalt, used as the blue colour in ceramics and is quite interesting if you take the time to look.

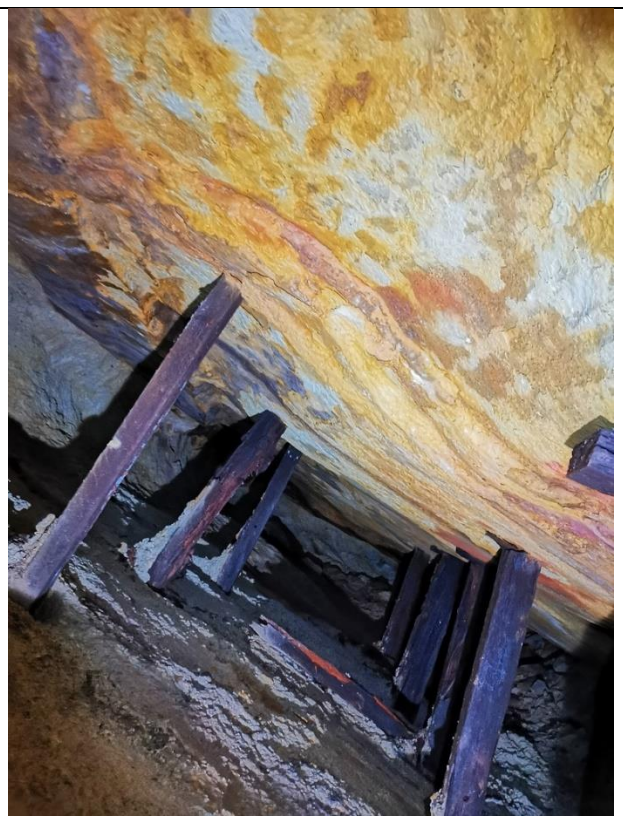
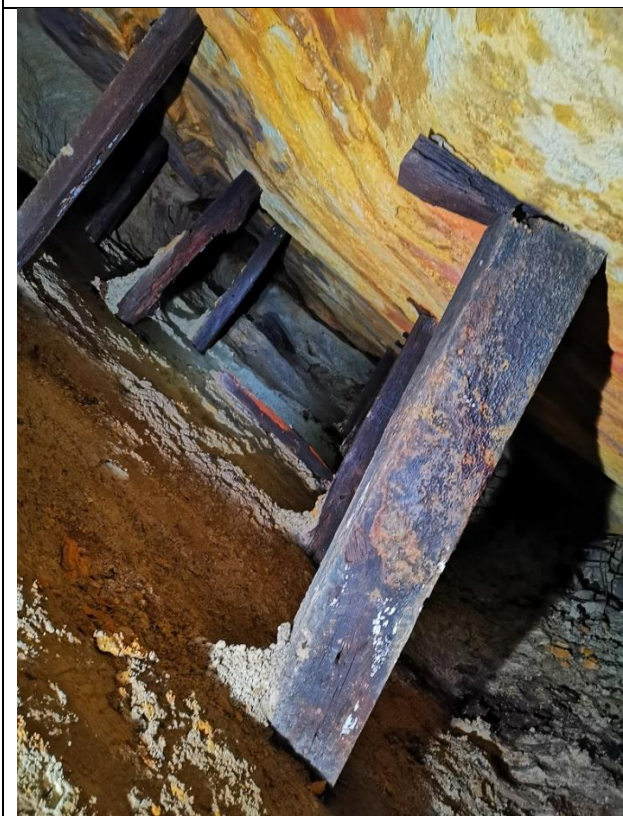
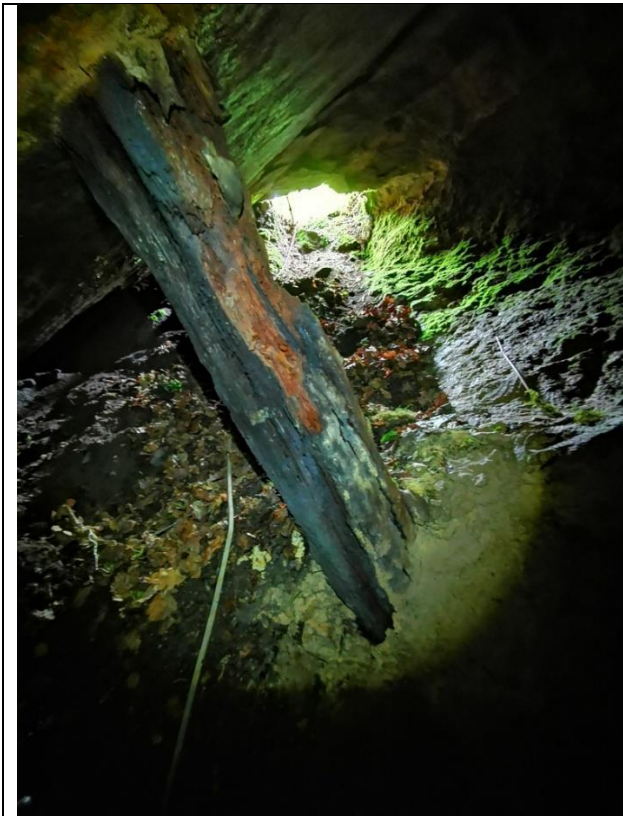
Well done finding the bit you did, it's far from obvious! A word of warning though. The roof being supported by those rotting timbers, is a single bed of rock. When it goes (and it can't be long now – it looked like a death trap twenty years ago!) it will more than likely come down "en masse" and with very little warning. In effect, the whole place could just clap shut!

Ganister

Ganister, a form of silica, was mined at Astbury and at the north end of the ridge that forms Mow Cop. Ganister is a hard, fine-grained quartzose sandstone used in the manufacture of silica brick, typically used to line furnaces. Ganisters are cemented with secondary silica, and typically have a characteristic splintery fracture (ref: Wikipedia). The ganister was quarried at the outcrop and then followed underground at the mines at Mow Cop. In 1908, the Astbury Silica Co. Ltd. had 11 people working underground. It was also mined at Sutton, near Macclesfield where there were various small workings.

[Copied from the Derbyshire Caving Club website, and included here, with the permission of Nigel Dibben.]

My thanks to Gaz Mcshee for posting a few of his Photos:



Definitely a little worrying – you might end up like the jam in a sandwich !
I can't help wondering how long those timbers have been in place, and how long they will remain.
Perhaps this place needs sealing/capping, to keep the local youngsters out.

The following article gives an account of a previous visit in the same area.

A visit to a very local mine: 12th June 1974

‘Three of us set out to explore.

The entrance passage runs down at an angle of about 45 degrees for a distance of 200 feet, passing several abandoned workings en-route. Some of these are very unstable and others are totally blocked, sometimes by collapse and at other times by deads. We did, however, venture into a couple of these and in one of them, track-lines were still present.

At the bottom of the entrance passage, a more or less horizontal passage ran for several hundred feet to the top of another incline at about the same angle and roughly the same distance as the first. Just before this a small passage branched off to the left – later found to be an ‘oxbow’. At the head of the incline was a winding-engine and wire rope in remarkably good condition, as well as two trucks, still laden.

Scrambling 200 odd feet down the incline was awkward, due to copious mud deposits, but the odd sleeper or two on the floor helped one to avoid a too-rapid descent. At the foot of the incline lay a couple of battered old pumps. This section readily floods in wet weather. At this point the passage led two ways – we opted for the right-hand passage, since the stemples in the roof looked less rotten, although copious fungal growths covered many of them. We later found that the stemples ‘support’ about 50 feet of deads ! This level ran for about 1000 feet to the furthest point of the mine – there was an abandoned shovel there.

Climbing up the deads, liberally plastered with mud and candle grease, we passed a large (3 feet long) fossil in the wall. Fifty feet up we met the roof, but progress was still possible along the top of the deads (back along the rift passage we had been in earlier). After a while, the rock roof degenerated again, with rotten stemples, but by then there was no turning back. Eventually we came to a cross-roads, with an inlet stream on the right – brightly coloured from iron deposits. The stream ran into the ‘oxbow’, previously mentioned, before disappearing. It resurges in the field, below the mine entrance. Our way lay straight ahead, along the top of, or underneath, the deads, stacked once again on rotten stemples. Some of these had been replaced where they had failed, and in one place the rubble from a collapse had been neatly stacked on each side of the passage. I was in this passage that the few formations, that existed, were seen. Finally, we reached the end of the 1000 foot working, then began the steady climb back over the deads to the short climbing shaft, lined entirely with ginging, to the surface.’

JRJ.

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At the time of this visit (1974) the mine was still being worked intermittently for Whetstone, and had, previously yielded some coal and clay. There was no general access then, and there is definitely none now. The workings could hardly be called ‘safe’ in 1974, and now, 46 years later, they are likely to be lethal, and that is even before you begin to consider the air quality. I have deliberately not given a precise location of this mine.

Such places are best left well alone.

Steve Knox

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Please consider submitting something for the September Newsletter !