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THE LITHIC STUDIES SOCIETY VISIT TO CRESWELL CRAGS, 14TH JULY 2007

Despite the recent problems caused by the torrential rain that had brought parts of the country to a standstill, a small group of Lithic Studies Society members met up at midday on the 14th July at the Creswell Museum and Education Centre. Here we were greeted in glorious sunshine by Ian Wall of the Creswell Heritage Trust, who gave us an introduction and brief history of the archaeological discoveries at the Crag.

Creswell Crag (Figure 1) is located just to the south of Worksop on the Nottinghamshire/Derbyshire border in the English Midlands. It has long been recognised for the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic discoveries that have been made in the caves that line the Crag: a gorge created by the River Meadow as it cuts through a belt of Magnesian limestone. The importance of Creswell's archaeology is reflected in its status as the type-site for the "Creswellian", a local equivalent of the Continental Magdalenian culture. More recently, Creswell shot to prominence when a number of animal engravings and other figures were discovered in the caves, and subsequently dated in excess of 12,800 years old. Creswell therefore provides Britain's only confirmed examples of Upper Palaeolithic cave art, comparable in style and chronology to that found in the world-renowned Franco-Cantabrian caves such as Altamira and Lascaux.

Our visit also coincided with National Archaeology Week and before exploring the caves we were treated to re-enactments of various prehistoric activities, including bronze casting and stone axe polishing, and enjoyed an impressive display of flint knapping skills by John Lord and his son Will.

Dr Paul Pettitt, of Sheffield University and one of the original discoverers of the Creswell Palaeolithic cave art, took us down into the gorge, starting at Church Hole Cave to view the recent discoveries (Figure 2). This cave contains the majority of the images that have been identified, most of which are located on the ceiling, some 12m in from the entrance and

clearly illuminated by the natural light. It appears that they would have been engraved just above the artist's head, although now, due to the 'emptying' of the cave's sediments during the 19th and early 20th centuries, they lie way above head height and a scaffold platform has been set up to allow close inspection and an appreciation of how the art was perceived by the artists working there. The most visually impressive images in this location consist of an engraving of what was initially considered to be an ibex but has now been confirmed as a red deer stag and, close to this, there is a clear depiction of a bison. All around the entrance area were various other engravings, including a variety of 'tally mark' incisions, schematised animal forms, geometric shapes such as ovals and triangles, and many seemingly random lines. Many of the depictions utilized or embellished natural features of the rock and it would appear that these features might have governed the positioning of the animal depictions. The red deer stag, for example, used a natural imperfection in the rock for the animal's eye.



Figure 1: Creswell Crags (© Barry Bishop)

Perhaps the most enigmatic depictions consist of an isolated group of curvilinear lines located further into the cave. These are the only engravings that cannot be viewed in natural light and have presented somewhat of an interpretative dilemma. They have been identified as a group of birds with elongated necks stretched upwards, and they certainly do bear resemblances to honking geese. However, Paul Pettitt did suggest an alternative interpretation: that they might in fact depict inverted, highly stylised female figures similar to those recorded in Continental Magdalenian art. They are engraved on the wall close to what would have been the Upper Palaeolithic floor level. In order to engrave them it would have been necessary for the artist to have squatted or knelt on the floor and lent over, thus the inverted figures would have appeared the 'correct' way up to them and anyone else wishing to view the images.

Having followed the press coverage of the discoveries and seen photographs in academic accounts, I was surprised, once I had 'got my eye in', just how easy to see many of these images actually are (Figure 3). At the modern floor level most of the images are very difficult to detect but, standing on the scaffold platform, the majority are just above head height and the daylight from the entrance brings out the subtle incisions and protuberances that form the images. They perhaps may not be the most stunning cave art when compared to some of the

best-known depictions from France or Spain but, Paul assured us, they can hold their own against 95% of the art from those regions. They are exquisite in their simplicity and it was an extraordinary feeling to be able to stand in the same spot and stare at the same image on the rock surface as the Palaeolithic artists did over 12,800 years ago.



Figure 2: Dr Paul Pettitt demonstrating the Palaeolithic art in Church Hole Cave (© Barry Bishop)

After viewing the engravings we ventured back into the sunshine to see the excavations: these are being conducted in the spoil that was removed from the cave during the early 20th century and are examining the original ground surfaces below. The finds from these layers are not prolific but we had the pleasure of inspecting a tiny baby mammoth's tooth as well as several Upper Palaeolithic flint blades.

Following this we were delivered into the hands of Dr Roger Jacobi from the British Museum who took us across to the north side of the gorge to view some of the other caves. Pin Hole Cave, although mostly having been emptied during the early 20th century, has produced

evidence of both Mousterian activity and Upper Palaeolithic occupation. The Mousterian evidence consists of two separate layers containing tools of flint and quartzite and significant quantities of faunal remains, including reindeer, hyaena, horse, bison and lion. It would appear that the cave was not primarily an occupation site, but the high frequency of scraping tools may suggest it fulfilled a specialist role, perhaps involving animal-hide processing. Further flint tools of early Upper Palaeolithic date were found in layers overlying those of the Mousterian. These include a wide variety of typologically different points and suggest that at least two phases of occupation occurred. Activity at the cave recommenced during the Late Upper Palaeolithic, as evidenced by further flint and bone artefacts and a faunal assemblage that included a number of mountain hares. The latter may have been hunted for their skins as much as their meat. Also identified were two possible hearths associated with fragmentary human remains and bone artefacts, including a woolly rhinoceros bone with an anthropomorphic figure engraved upon it. It is quite possible that this cave, rather too narrow to provide a comfortable living environment, may have been used for funerary or other ceremonial activities.

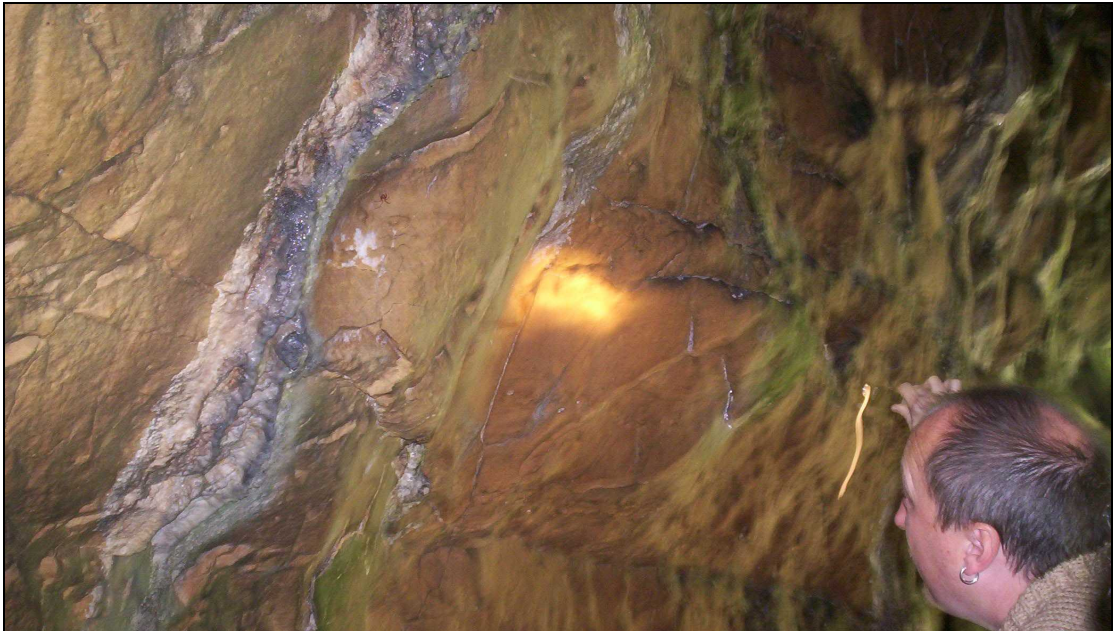


Figure 3: Palaeolithic art engravings in Church Hole Cave (© Dr Barry Bishop)

Next we made our way along to Robin Hood's Cave. This had been emptied during the 19th century and, unfortunately, the records made were ambiguous and most of the finds lost, although the cave appears to have been extensively occupied during the Mousterian period. The evidence suggests the use of hearths during this period, and there are tantalizing suggestions that Mousterian human remains were found, these being of the greatest rarity in Britain. As with Pin Hole Cave, occupation is also attested for Robin Hood's Cave during both the Early and Late Upper Palaeolithic, although precisely what was found remains in doubt. Recent excavations through the 19th century spoil heaps and material naturally washed out from the cave has provided some indications of the importance of these cave deposits. Substantial lithic assemblages were present as well as faunal assemblages which included hyaena, woolly rhino, red fox, horse, reindeer, ibex and mountain hare, the latter exhibiting cut marks that again indicate the importance of this species for meat and furs. This cave also produced the famous rib bone depicting an exquisitely incised image of a horse's head.

The last visit of the day was to Mother Grundy's Parlour, another cave virtually emptied during the 19th century but which has also provided important, if poorly recorded and tantalizing, evidence dating to the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic. Additionally a significant Mesolithic site has been recorded just outside of the cave's entrance.

The nature of the artefact and faunal assemblages from each of the last three caves we visited varied considerably and it is possible that the caves were used for different purposes at different times: sometimes they may have provided dwelling places and at other times they may have been used for more specialized functions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the bulk of the evidence for human habitation comes from the caves on the northern side of the gorge: facing south, these receive the maximum warmth and sunlight. Interestingly however, the majority of the artwork was not located within these caves, but in Church Hole on the 'dark' southern side of the gorge, where relatively few indications of human occupation have been identified. It might be that this presents further evidence for the caves having specialized roles during these later parts of the Palaeolithic.

Time was now getting short and we quickly made our way back to the Creswell Museum and Education Centre, where Roger Jacobi showed us a collection of superb Middle and Upper Palaeolithic stone artefacts. Unfortunately, the large quantities of artefacts that have been recovered from the caves are now widely dispersed around the world and many have been lost. Nevertheless, the examples retained at the Centre proved to be a veritable typological treasure chest, with good examples of many of the major tool types from the Middle Palaeolithic to the Later Neolithic present. This allowed Roger to demonstrate, for example, such intricacies as the differences between a Font Robert point, a Penknife point, a Cheddar point and a Creswell point, pieces only rarely encountered amongst typical assemblages examined by lithic specialists in Britain. They also allowed us to gain hands-on experience of the wide variety of raw materials that had been utilized by the previous inhabitants of the caves.

Despite the emptying of most of the caves there is still considerable research potential in the old excavations' spoil heaps, extant Palaeolithic surfaces surrounding the caves, and in deposit remnants still present in the caves. This is, and will continue to be, the focus of an anticipated long-running research programme instigated by our hosts, Paul Pettitt and Roger Jacobi, as well as many others, and further discoveries are awaited with anticipation. All that is left to do is to thank the Creswell Heritage Trust and our hosts for an extremely enjoyable and informative day, and wish them all the very best for their forthcoming work at the Craggs.

Barry Bishop

LITHIC STUDIES SOCIETY 2007 AGM LECTURE

As part of the AGM, an added bonus (and likely factor in the high numbers attending) was the inclusion of a talk on the Early Middle Palaeolithic (EMP) of the Thames, as well as a lithics handling session. The lecture was a mutual presentation by Beccy Scott and Claire Fisher. Beccy's recent PhD on the subject as well as both her and Claire's first hand experience with the collections in question held by the British Museum proved to be invaluable in conveying the fascinating nature of this period.