

# Bones and Circles

## Banwell Bone Cave and Stanton Drew

**T**his excursion in July 2012, concentrated on two aspects of the prehistory of North Somerset; a morning visit to the caves, follies and tower at Banwell followed by an afternoon amongst the stone circles at Stanton Drew.

**Tim Lunt** The original Banwell Stalactite Cave was discovered by mineral miners in 1757 and opened as a showcave in 1824 by the vicar of Banwell. To aid access to this cave, a tunnel was driven into the hill at a lower level which broke into another cavern, the Bone Cave, containing large quantities of prehistoric animal bones.

The caves were on the estate of George Laws, then Bishop of Bath and Wells, who regarded the bones as being evidence of animals drowned in Noah's flood. The Bishop hoped to demonstrate the accuracy of this Bible story, and so the area was developed as an early form of religious theme park. Footpaths were laid leading through the woods to various grottos, summerhouses and sham ancient monuments which were adorned with biblical texts to remind visitors of how the flood destroyed "the wicked world". The park and caves were re-opened to the public in 1825 and remained open until 1865.

Sold finally by the Bishop's family in 1902, the property was bought about 30 years ago by a group of enthusiasts who wished to restore the now decaying monuments and reopen the caves for public viewing. Since then, they and other volunteers of the Banwell Caves Heritage Group, have slowly brought the park back from dereliction, re-opened the caves and protected them through Natural England, with 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' status.

Three of the original Banwell Caves Heritage Group members still live in the Bishop's house, built above the caves, and act as guides for visitors. We watched a short historical video at the house, before being taken down to see the remarkable bone cave lit by candlelight. Stacks of bones from bison, bear, wolf, deer, fox, otter and other species line the walls, all dating from the Pleistocene era leading up to the end of the last Ice Age some 70,000 years ago. An extraordinary sight and inevitably begging the question, how did they get there? It seems that the cave acted as a sump when the ice age finally ended and water poured through the cave bringing with it the remains of the many creatures that had died on the surface over previous millennia. No human bones were found as the climate was then too cold for early humans.

Our guided tour continued around the grounds and its many features including the Druids Temple, the Pebble Summerhouse and the site of the Osteicon, or Bone House, soon to be reconstructed. At the top of the hill is the 59 feet high Bishop Law Tower, built in 1840 and reopened in 1996, with 360° panoramic views to the Severn Estuary and Mendips. The original stalactite cave is now only open to cavers but extends for over 60m (200ft) through boulders to two chambers and a green lake.



**Figure 1**  
**Banwell**  
**circa 1830**  
**(Image**  
**reproduced**  
**with the**  
**kind**  
**permission**  
**of the**  
**Banwell**  
**Caves**  
**Heritage**  
**Group).**



**Figure 2**  
**Banwell Bone Cave (Image reproduced with the kind permission of the Banwell Caves Heritage Group).**

We reformed at Stanton Drew in the afternoon to meet our guide John Oswin, BACAS geophysics leader, for this revisit to The Cove and stone circles (thought to date from between 3000-2000BC), following requests from those who missed out on the excursion in 2011. The first part of the tour followed the description of the excursion given in the 2012 Camertonia report (pages 47-49).

Since then, further work by BACAS has taken place across the river to the north of Stone Close. Located here is the site of Hautville's Quoit, now reduced to a small recumbent stone under a hedge close to Quoit Farm (see report page 15). Made of sandstone, the 2m length of the Quoit now remaining shows signs of having been broken; probably, as reported by early visitors, for use as road stone. In early 2012, BACAS surveyed the area by various geophysical methods but with no definitive results. However an eroded large mound was noted in the field beside the north side of the river below the farm and approximately in line with both the northeast circle and The Great Circle. Further work is required to determine if the mound is natural or artificial but its position and the importance of mounds at other Neolithic sites, such as Stonehenge and Avebury, make it worthy of further investigation. In addition, the position of the mound just above and surrounded on three sides by the 40m contour may be significant, as the valley was known to flood to this level prior to the construction of Chew Valley reservoir.

BACAS plan to continue further activity at Stanton Drew by extending the survey area into the fields south and east of the southwest circle and The Cove as well as further investigations around the sites of the other standing stones.

**Figure 3**  
**Stanton Drew flooding area showing mound and circles.**

