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# **A Field Investigation in the Environs of Merlin's Cave, Symond's Yat West, Herefordshire**

Report prepared by  
Tim Hoverd & Lara Bishop



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Conservation and Environmental Planning  
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Herefordshire Council

# **A Field Investigation in the Environs of Merlin's Cave, Symond's Yat West, Herefordshire**

**NGR: SO 5568 1533  
HSM 51836**

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**Herefordshire Archaeology** is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

***Herefordshire Archaeology  
PO Box 230  
Blueschool House  
Blueschool Street  
Hereford  
HR1 2ZB***

### **Summary:**

*A member of the public reported that archaeological artefacts, (flint, animal bone and pottery), had been unearthed by recent tree throws at the base of a cliff close to Merlin's Cave in Symonds Yat gorge. In partnership with Forestry Commission and Overlooking The Wye, (HLF), Herefordshire Archaeology visited the site and noted that five trees had recently blown over, resulting in small but deep areas of localised disturbance. Pottery, flint and bone fragments were recovered from three of these areas of disturbance. An assessment of the potential of the area was made by cutting back into the areas of disturbance and recording the exposed sections. It was noted that the artefacts appeared to be contained within a series of in situ deposits immediately above a natural soil. This was buried beneath a modern soil, on top of which was the spoil from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century excavations of Merlin's Cave.*

*During the course of cleaning one of the tree throws, the articulated remains (pelvis, femurs and patallae) of a human were discovered. The remains appear to have been buried in a relatively shallow grave cut, aligned on a roughly east / west axis. The grave was clearly sealed by a series of deposits which appeared to closely resemble those of other tree throw sections from which prehistoric finds were recovered. The burial was excavated and recorded by Prof. A. Chamberlain, (University of Sheffield). The length of the femurs and shape of the pelvis would suggest a well built, (1.8m tall) male. A fragment of bone was removed for dating purposes but the rest of the burial was left undisturbed. The cleaned sections and bases were then backfilled. The artefactual evidence would suggest that there has been human activity on the site from the Neolithic to the end of the Romano-British period. The stratigraphic relationship of the burial to the deposits found to contain artefacts would indicate a prehistoric date. It is hoped that further, small scale work will be undertaken on the site in the near future.*

**Disclaimer:** It should not be assumed that land referred to in this document is accessible to the public. Location plans are indicative only. NGR's are accurate to approximately 10m. Measured dimensions are accurate to within 1m at a scale of 1:500, 0.1m at 1:50, and 0.02m at 1:20.

Figures contained within this report contain material from the Ordnance Survey. The grid in this material is the National Grid taken from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (OS Licence 100024168). This material has been reproduced in order to locate the site in its environs.

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## **Introduction**

This report (HSM 51836) provides an account of small scale excavations carried out in the immediate vicinity of Merlin's Cave, near Symond's Yat, Herefordshire (NGR SO 5568 1533). The cave is situated in the rock face at the top of a steep slope approximately 58m above the River Wye. On the slope immediately below the cave mouth five trees had fallen over and flints, animal bone and prehistoric pottery were observed within the tree throw holes and root plates.

The excavation took place over three days from Monday 29 March until Wednesday 31 March 2010. Fieldwork was undertaken by Herefordshire Archaeology staff, assisted by local volunteers and with specialist input from Andrew Chamberlain, Professor in Biological Anthropology (Sheffield University).

## **Aims and Objectives**

A number of trees had recently been blown over and their roots had pulled out leaving a series of five small scars on the steep, south facing, hill slope. Two of these scars had been investigated by a local resident and a variety of artefacts recovered. These ranged from late Neolithic flint-work to Romano - British pottery, and included animal bone, prehistoric pottery and human bone and teeth.

Due to the amount of material recovered from these relatively small areas and the fact that human skeletal material was present, Herefordshire Archaeology, in partnership with the Forestry Commission, Natural England and Sheffield University, agreed a small scale recording and investigative project. The principal aim of this programme was to understand the origin of the finds i.e. whether they were originally deposited in the cave and subsequently thrown out across the slope or, whether they relate to a site in-front of the cave.

## **Location**

Merlin's Cave is a large cave situated on the west bank of the River Wye, approximately 0.8km south of Symond's Yat West, at SO 5568 1533. It lies in the parish of Whitchurch, Herefordshire, between Monmouth 6km to the southwest and Ross-on-Wye 9km to the northeast.



**Figure 1: Map indicating the location of the study area within the county**

The area lies at the junction of numerous geological layers. The site is characterised by the carboniferous limestone series of the upper old red sandstone. The lower slopes consist of the lower dolomite series and above this is a significant limestone band (British Geological Survey 1989).

The soils of this area are the Crwbin series, part of the Rankers group and consist of fine silt over carboniferous limestone. Merlin's Cave lies within the northern, upstream, end of the Wye Gorge. The course of the Wye here is thought to have arisen when a large river meandered across a floodplain of soft sediments and then cut down through successive layers of rock as land levels rose, the result is the spectacular Wye Gorge.

The river runs some 120m below the plateau at this point. On the east side the cliffs are virtually vertical whilst on the west they are slightly less steep. The distance between the plateaux at the top of the gorge is 400m. The river is confined within a narrow course leading to dramatic rises in water levels in times of flood. The limestone geology has given rise to some classic Karst features; isolated pillars of rock tower above the river and caves are abundant.

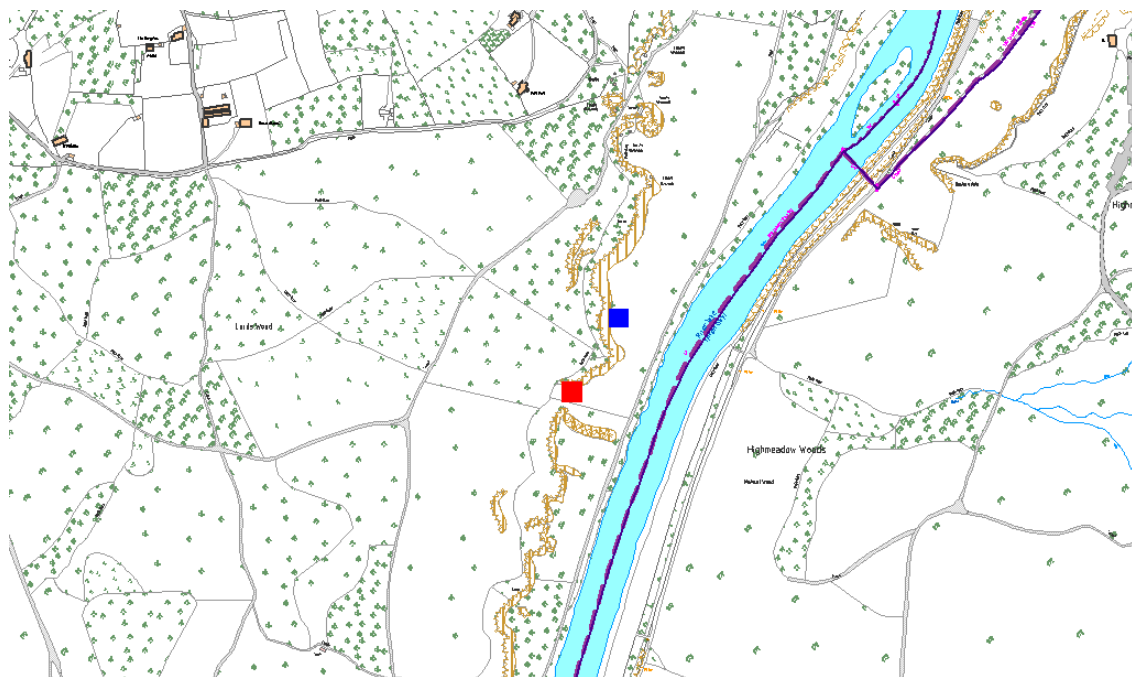
## Previous Archaeological Work

There have been several previous archaeological investigations within Merlin's Cave, (see Sites and Monuments Record entries below).

Large cave right bank R Wye, 0.5 mile below Symonds Yat (sited from map to SO55591521) excav 1924-9. Entrance in face of limestone cliff, top of steep slope, c150' above river. Formerly nameless, called Merlin's Cave by UBSS. Earlier interference for iron ore mining had destroyed stratification. Finds indicated occasional occupation in Neo, BA & IA & RB period. Few human bones were only relic of Palaeolithic. (1) Flint implement poss upper palaeolithic was found. (2) Exam of rockface for some distance N & S of given siting revealed complete absence of caves. But at SO55671542 large cave referred to by forestry worker as Merlin's Cave, but not the cave which appears in photo in authority 1. The cave is natural feature & has narrow entrance giving access to a high, deep cavern. Floor natural rock, suggesting cave to have been cleared of all deposits by excav, though there is no spoil heap outside entrance. This may have been washed away down V steep natural slope. (3) Further investigation in 1996 by Dr R Barton included a measured plan and a record of surviving in situ sediments on the cave walls. Evidence of human remains cemented onto the wall, and faunal/microfaunal material relating to the Late Glacial period. Artefacts recovered in reworked deposits included a worked shale armlet (probably Iron Age) and some undiagnostic prehistoric pottery (NL-BA-IA). (4)

## Protected status

### 1. Scheduled Monument 13692: MERLIN'S CAVE, GREAT DOWARD

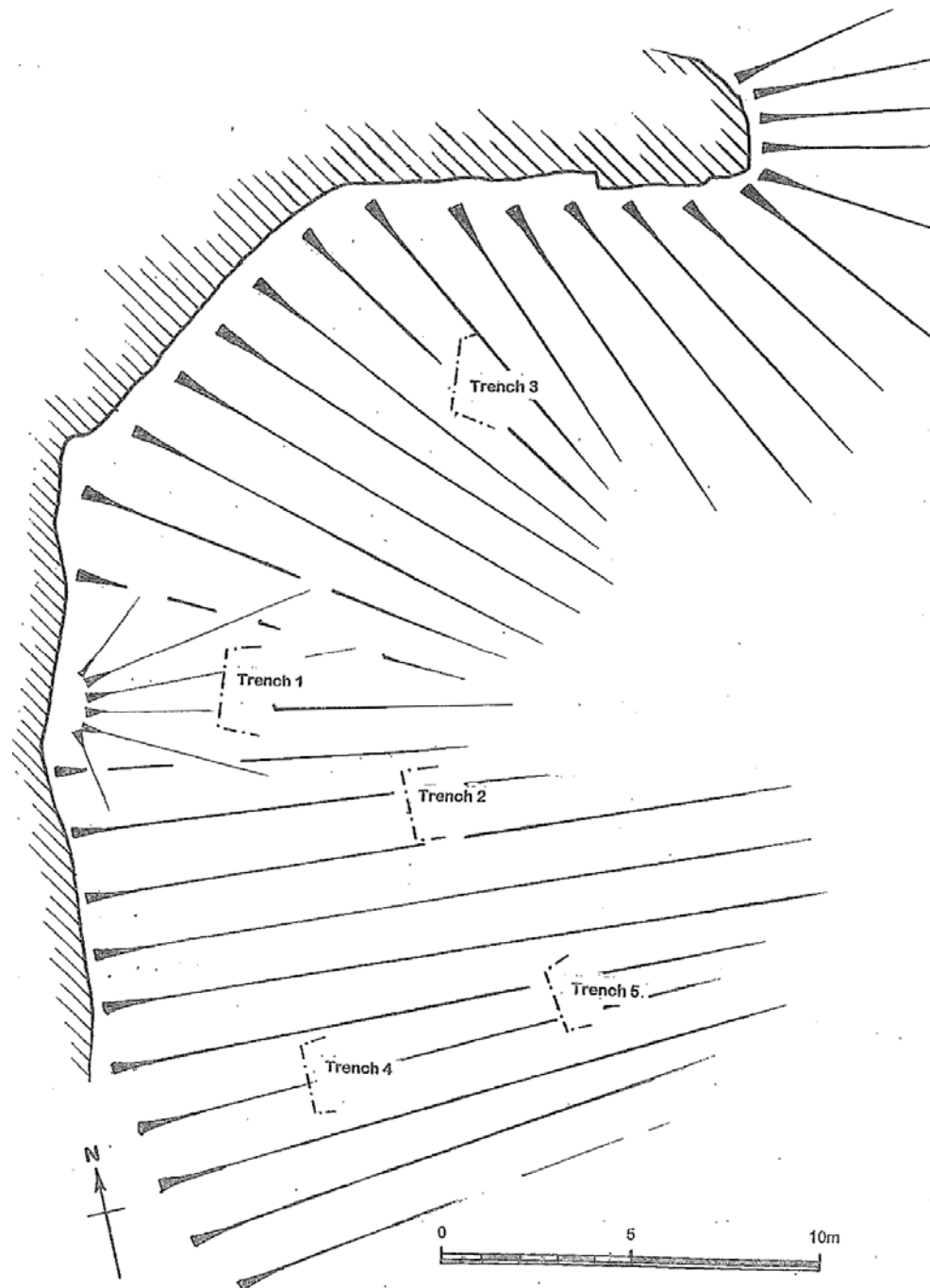


**Figure 2: Map indicating the position of Merlin's Cave (blue) and the location of the scheduling (red)**

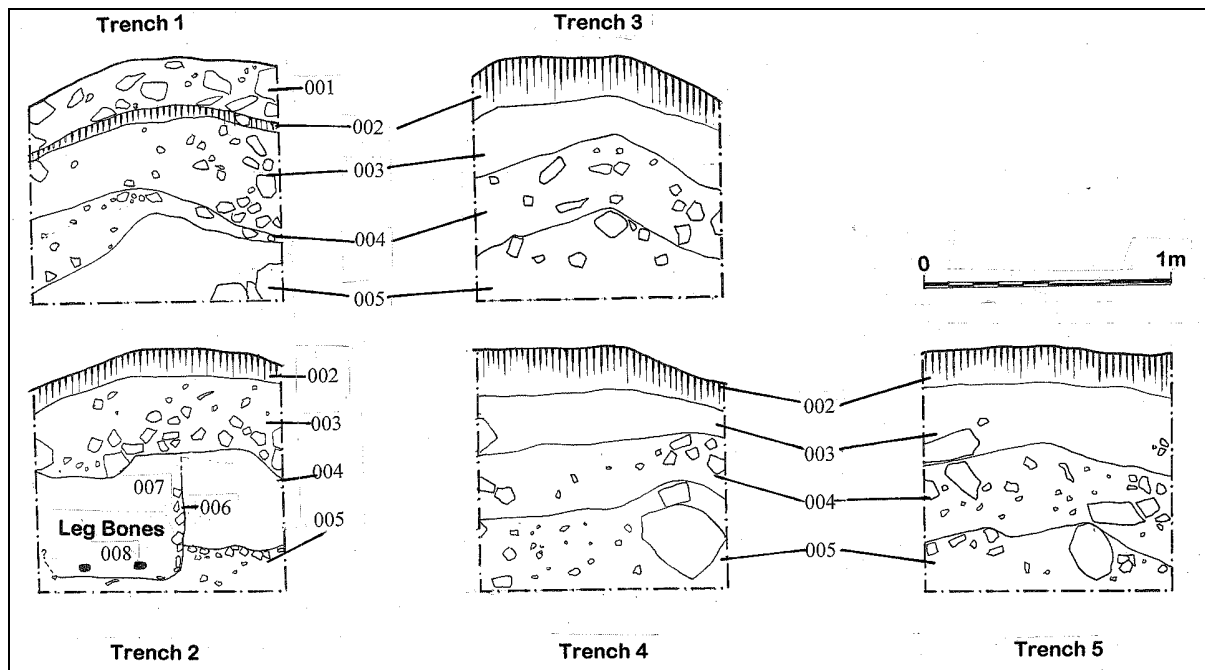


### Fieldwork in 2010

The five tree throw scars were cut back to vertical faces and the loose material which had eroded from the root balls was examined and removed. The scars were then excavated down to the natural subsoil. The vertical sections were recorded photographically and by scaled drawing. Their locations were plotted by a hand held Global Positioning System.



**Figure 3: Location Plan of trenches / tree throws.**



**Figure 4: Drawn record of cleaned sections. (All sections are western sections)**

### **Trench 1**

This was located at NGR SO 55670 15332 and comprised a 1.8m long (north / south) by 0.9m wide (east / west) scar. A local resident had recovered a large quantity of flint, pottery and animal bone together with a small number human bone fragments from both the scar and the tree root-plate. These ranged in date from the Neolithic to the Romano-British period. The exposed sections were cut back and recorded stratigraphically.

Trench 1 was located approximately 6m to the east of the base of the cliff, immediately below Merlin's Cave. The cave was "excavated" in 1924 and the spoil was thrown out of the cave, forming a cone shaped heap. The base of the spoil heap covered the location of Trench 1 forming the top layer of soil in section (001). This comprised a loose, well mixed, loamy soil with frequent angular stones. Below this was the pre-1924 ground surface, a 5cm thick loamy soil (002). This covered a 0.5m thick layer of dark earth containing frequent small angular stones (003). Under this was a loose, grey soil which was virtually stone free, (004). This overlay a well compacted orange / buff stony natural, (005), which contained a quantity of angular stone, including some large boulders.





**Plate 1: Western section of Trench 1 showing natural horizon.**

The majority of finds, (animal bone, Prehistoric pottery and flint) were recovered from layer (004). This appears to be a buried soil directly overlying the natural sub-soil. A small quantity of finds were recovered from (003). These however were more mixed in age and more fragmented (particularly the pottery), suggesting that this layer has either been previously disturbed or at least partially re-deposited. Rodent bones were recovered from all layers, including the natural subsoil (005).



**Plate 2: Northern section of Trench 1 showing natural horizon and angle of hill slope.**

## Trench 2

This was located at NGR SO: 55674 15330 approximately 11m to the south / east of Trench 1. The scar measured 2.4m long (north / south) and 1.6m wide, (east / west).

The stratigraphy apparent after cleaning was broadly similar to that present in Trench 1, with the exception that the spoil (001) was absent. As in Trench 1, a 0.5m thick layer of dark soil and frequent angular stones,(003), was apparent. This layer contained a significant quantity of animal and human bone but no pottery or diagnostic flint. Below this deposit was a layer of more compacted grey / buff material. This was similar in make up to (004) in Trench 1 but was thicker (0.4m) and appeared to have disturbed natural in its matrix. A small amount of animal bone and flint was recovered from this deposit. A stone lined cut, (006), was apparent (to the left of the ranging pole in plate 3), which appears to extend from the base of layer (003) and cut through (004) to the top of the natural subsoil (005). The top fill, (007) of cut (006) closely resembled (004), but was less well compacted and contained the occasional fragments of charcoal. This directly overlay the femurs and pelvis of a human skeleton, (008). The burial was aligned roughly east – west, with its head to the east. The Patella were present at both knees however the feet and lower leg bones were absent. Measurements taken of the femur length suggest an individual of 1.8m in height. A sample was taken for dating purposes, however the rest of the skeletal remains were left *in situ*. No cut to the south of the burial was found. This may however be due to the lack of depth of layer (004) at this point due to the angle of slope. The burial (008) and layer (004) both directly overlay the well compacted buff / orange natural subsoil (005). It would appear that the grave cut (006) was cut from the top of deposit (004) and has slumped resulting in the top 0.15m containing the slumped material of (003).





**Plate 3: Western section of Trench 2 showing human burial and associated features below stony layer.**



**Plate 4: Plan view of femurs, ranging pole point is pointing South.**

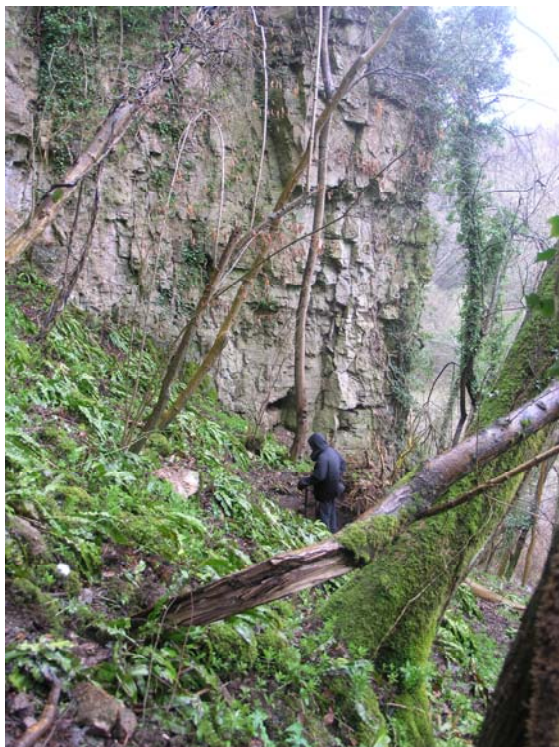


### Trench 3

This was located at NGR SO: 55673 15345, approximately 12m to the north - east of Trench 2. The scar measured 1.6m north / south by 1.3m east / west. The stratigraphy exposed was consistent with that within trenches 4 and 5, however two small flint fragments were recovered together with 8 fragments of animal bone from (003).



**Plate 5: Western section of Trench 3 showing natural horizon.**



**Plate 6: View of Trench 3 location from Trench 2, showing steepness of slope and general setting.**

## Trench 4

This was located at NGR SO: 55685 15328, approximately 12m to the south / west of Trench 2. The scar measured 1.6m long (north / south) and 1.2m wide, (east / west).

The general Stratigraphic sequence of the exposed soil profile was similar to Trenches 1 and 2, in that, below a thin modern topsoil (002), a 0.4m thick, loose and stony deposit (003) was encountered. This directly overlay the well compacted natural (005). Interestingly layer (004) was not visible within the exposed section. A number of fragments of animal bone were recovered from layer (003). No flint or pottery was recovered.



**Plate 7: Western section of Trench 4 showing natural horizon.**



**Plate 8: Southern section of Trench 4 showing soil profile and angle of hill slope.**



## Trench 5

This was located at NGR SO: 55668 15321, approximately 8m to the east of Trench 3. The tree throw scar measured 1.4m north / south by 1.2m east / west. The stratigraphy exposed after clearing matched that of Trench 3, however, no finds were recovered from this trench.



**Plate 9: Western section of Trench 5 showing natural horizon.**



**Plate 10: View of location of Trench 5 from Trench 2.**



## Discussion

From this rapid and small scale fieldwork it would seem that the slope immediately below the cliffs and cave site contains a mixture of *in-situ* archaeological deposits, (as demonstrated by the presence of the human burial in Trench 2), together with a mix of re-deposited or very disturbed archaeological material. It would appear that little, (if any) of the archaeological material has come from the cave – the spoil from the 1924 excavations (001), was devoid of archaeological finds. Layer (003) appears to cover the entire hill-slope and it is from this that the majority of finds were recovered. The finds comprise of human and animal bone, flint and pottery. The pottery appears to have a date range from the mid-Neolithic to the Romano-British period (R. Peterson *pers comm.*).

It is clear that a small proportion of this material has come from a cave, (occasional fragments of pottery and bone have cave concretions attached to them), however the vast majority of the material would appear to have originated from outside the cave. It is possible that the concreted material was either re-deposited from inside Merlin's Cave during its "exploration" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; or, that this material has naturally eroded out of either Merlin's Cave or the remains of a second cave to the south as the cliff face has eroded back. This however does not explain the remainder of the material. It is suggested, due to the large amount of material and the area over which it occurs that (003) does indeed contain a certain amount of very disturbed but generally *in-situ* archaeological material. It is most likely that the majority of this disturbance has been due to root disturbance, (including past tree throws), and animal burrowing. Layer / deposit (004) seems to be more localised and less disturbed than (003). It only appears within Trenches 1 and 2 and in both instances produced finds only of prehistoric date. It is therefore regarded as a largely *in-situ* deposit.

The burial within Trench 2, (008), was unexpected and appears to be unusual with regard to its location. Unless the profile of the present hill-slope has changed radically since the burial was inserted, then burying a body on an east – west alignment on such a steep slope would have been problematical. The depth required to excavate the grave at the western end (the head end in this instance) would have had to exceed two metres in order to provide even the thinnest covering of the eastern (feet end) of the burial. It would have been far easier, and made the burial less prone to erosion, to have cut the grave along the contour on a north / south alignment. One can only suggest that the manner and orientation of the burial was not dictated by topography but by ritual beliefs and burial practices of the time, possibly linked to significant points in the landscape. The alignment of the burial means that the individual would be facing the River Wye to the east and "looking out" across the Symonds Yat Gorge. The burial would also be facing the rising sun.

The age of the burial is uncertain. Stratigraphically, it would appear that the grave cut through layer (004). If layer (004) is an *in situ* deposit of prehistoric date then one is led to conclude that the burial could be of any date from at least the later prehistoric period to the medieval.

## **Recommendations for Further Work/Research**

This is clearly an interesting site with the potential for further information to be obtained. Some of the areas in which further work would be extremely useful are an appraisal of the location of all previous finds from the site to facilitate a re-assessment and full publication of the site record from Barton's investigations in the 1990s.

Further useful on-site work would include a re-assessment of the cave, including accurate recording of its location and a more detailed description, in order to distinguish it from the several other caves in the area with the same name. Furthermore, a series of small test pit investigations would be useful within the cave and on the slopes below to determine the degree of preservation and the extent of archaeological deposits. This would also be useful in order to ascertain whether burial (008) is unique or part of a cemetery.

If this fieldwork is to be taken further then funding should be sought in order to obtain a C14 date from the sample retained from burial (008). Due to the mix of finds from layer (003) and to a lesser extent (004), at this time, all that can be said is that burial (008) is most likely of mid to late prehistoric or later in date.

Prior to further fieldwork taking place it would be desirable for a number of the trees growing on the upper slope to be felled. This would rapidly mitigate further damage by tree throw and would increase the amount of light which would aid future excavation.

## **Site Archive**

2 Sheets of site drawings  
1 Entry in field notebook  
44 digital photographs  
2 sheets of inked drawings  
1 Box of finds  
This Document

## **Acknowledgements**

Herefordshire archaeology would like to thank the Forestry Commission and The Overlooking The Wye , Heritage Lottery Project, for their co-operation and support throughout the project. We would also like to thank Natural England for their co-operation.

The input by Prof. Andrew Chamberlain was particularly appreciated.

Special thanks must go to Mr. C. Hoare for reporting his initial discoveries and assisting in the fieldwork.

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Plate 9: Western section of Trench 5 showing natural horizon.

Plate 10: View of Trench 5 location from Trench 2, showing steepness of slope and general setting.

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## **Validation**

Herefordshire Archaeology operates a validation system for its reports, to provide quality assurance and to comply with Best Value procedures.

This report has been checked for accuracy and clarity of statements of procedure and results.

Dr. Keith Ray, County Archaeologist