

Chapter Five

Sacrifices to the Witch?

by *Ted Mason*



For ten or twelve years I had been excavating caves in search of ancient remains and nothing was further from my thoughts than cave diving. I knew, of course, that divers were exploring the subterranean River Axe within the Great Cave of Wookey Hole in search of new chambers and I don't suppose anything was further from their thoughts than underwater archaeology. I had, in fact, done a little diving myself with Arthur Hill under the instruction of Graham Balcombe and Jack Sheppard at Ffynnon Ddu in the Swansea Valley over Easter 1946 when they attempted to get into the then unknown Ogof Ffynnon Ddu system. This was not realised until Peter Harvey and Bill Weaver dug their way in during the August Bank Holiday weekend that Summer. However, the diving meet at Easter saw the birth of the new Cave Diving Group. But I had no ambition to pursue diving like the others.



*Fig. 5.1
The iconic silhouette of
The Witch of Wookey Hole
stalagmite (left) in the First
Chamber, also called the
Witch's Kitchen.
Human remains were first found
on the river bed beyond the boat
(right), Whitsun 1946.
Photo by Peter Baker from
Wookey Hole Caves*

Fate was to play a hand for in 1946 while exploring Wookey Hole Graham Balcombe stumbled across human remains and pottery. And so I was asked by the Cave Diving Group whether I would take control of the archaeological problems, to which I consented and was given the imposing title of 'Archaeological Controller'. Obviously, my little knowledge of cave diving would have to be improved so I attended the group training sessions at the Mayor's Paddock Baths in Bristol. After encountering problems over chlorine deposits accumulating in our diving kit there, we transferred to the Minery pool at Priddy where the pre-War team, led by Balcombe, had started it all.

I was put in the water at the end of a rope and told to make my way underwater to the opposite bank of the Minery pond. Not only was the water murky, but long reeds grew from the bottom and I had to fight my way through an entanglement of sub-aquatic foliage. More alarmingly, people had been using it as a rubbish dump for years; bedsteads and crates were concealed among the reeds, not the kind of material that would attract an archaeologist let alone an inexperienced diver! At one point my foot was snared in the pool's plant life and, falling backwards over a box, I landed in a pram which had settled right-way-up on the bed of the pool. There I was firmly seated in the pram, my head sticking up at one end and my feet at the other. Now getting out of a pram when in full diving gear is not at all easy. I tried rocking it so as to fall out, but the weeds had grown into the wheels and held it firmly to the ground. I tried raising my body out of it but was jammed solidly between the sides. If only I could get the wheels loose, at least I would have been able to return to shore, even if the obstacle was still attached to my seat and would no doubt have caused surprise and amusement to those waiting for me to surface. Probably any casual passer by would have thought it part of my equipment!

*Fig. 5.2
Operation Bung turns into
Operation Prehistory. Graham
Balcombe returns from his first
upstream dive from the Witch's
Kitchen with a human skull,
assisted by Harry Stanbury,
Whitsun 1946.
Photo by Luke Devenish*



As a matter of fact, perhaps it is not a bad idea to have such an attachment for those intent on long dives for they would be able to rest in comfort when necessary. My position was hardly comfortable at the time, however, as the exertion of rocking the pram led me to consume more gas and the cylinder would soon run out. I made one last stupendous effort. Thankfully, the front wheels became free, the pram tilted and I slid over the handle bar, not at all gracefully but at last able to continue my journey to the opposite bank of the pool. When I surfaced, I was pleased to see that the shore party was there to meet me, only to be told that they had not moved! They had, in fact, only paid out about 20 feet of rope for I had simply completed a circle underwater. I learnt a lot about the dangers of becoming disorientated in cave dives from this experience.

My next exercise was at Wookey Hole. I was pleased when the trainer told me to follow him and do everything that he did. We both jumped into the water and I turned towards him to see what he did next. Through my visor, I was surprised to see a pair of boots the wrong way up. He was standing on his head which appeared to be a difficult feat for my very first exercise! I gave the emergency signal to be hauled out and both of us were helped out onto the bank. It transpired that the dressers had forgotten to give my companion the lead soles for his boots. When they removed his visor, the flow of language was quite terrific and I don't think that he repeated himself once!

Then, later, I had my first solo dive. I was no sooner in the water and submerged when I had difficulty in breathing. Once again, I gave the required five tugs to be pulled up. Dan Hasell was the operation Controller. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Can't breathe' I replied. So, Dan asked the helpers to strip down my equipment to see what was wrong. They took everything to pieces, spread it all out on the bank and then reassembled it all checking every fitting. It must have taken about half an hour before I had it on again. Dan slapped me on the back saying: 'It's alright now. Is the breathing O.K.?' 'Yes, perfect!' 'All right, in you go'. And I had a good trip.

A year or so later, when Dorrien and I were sorting relics on the same bank, a new diver entered the water on his first solo trip. After about a minute, I heard the controller, Dan Hasell again, say to the others: 'I thought he would have been out by now'. And sure enough, he had hardly said it when the diver signalled to be pulled out complaining that he couldn't breathe. I glanced up and noticed that his breathing bag was inflating and deflating quite normally. There was obviously nothing wrong with the circuit. Then, to my surprise, Dan said: 'All right lads. Strip down his equipment and see what's wrong', and they went through the same routine as they had done in my case. I realised for the first time that this was exactly what had happened to me, and that it was just a case of panic on one's first dive alone. The breathing 'fault' was purely psychological and I thought how well the Controller had handled the matter for, by his actions and that of the team, he had completely restored the diver's confidence.

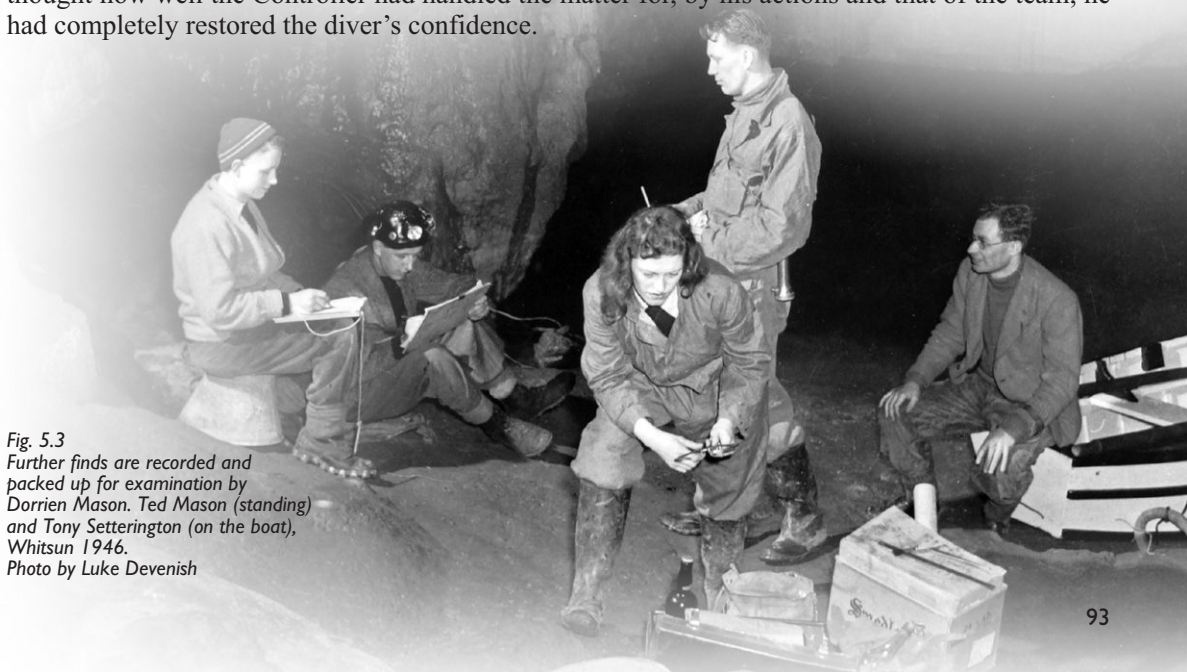


Fig. 5.3
Further finds are recorded and packed up for examination by Dorrien Mason. Ted Mason (standing) and Tony Setterington (on the boat), Whitsun 1946.
Photo by Luke Devenish

Dan Hasell has spent hours in Wookey Hole Caves controlling numerous diving operations. He reckons that you can't control divers, in fact, because they are there to get on with the diving in their own different ways. Well, who knows how many have had their kit checked out by Dan! That's just one reason why he became President of the Cave Diving Group.

The archaeological operations at Wookey Hole were a challenge as no other such organised underwater investigations had ever been carried out before in a cave; nor probably since in terms of the amount of relics found in the Great Cave. There had been under-sea operations on ancient sunken vessels, but these did not involve actual excavation. This merely meant picking up material already exposed on the sea bed. The difficulty was how to adapt systematic archaeological methods used on the surface where dating and the relationships among finds depend upon stratigraphy and each soil layer is removed in turn to obtain relative dates, getting older as the dig deepens. On the bed of the River Axe in Wookey Hole Caves, however, changing currents kept shifting the sediment and, after floods for example, whole mud banks would appear in different places. The river bed often altered from one week to the next. So we had to keep looking over the same ground and, by carefully locating every find on plans drawn up by Jack Duck, hope that the changing picture would reveal their source and the story behind them. Each find was carefully recorded and identified for its likely date.

Herbert Balch had found relics from the Iron Age to medieval times in the Great Cave, but the main material consisted of Romano-British remains excavated in the dry passages. It seemed unlikely to me that finds of any other period than the Romano-British would turn up in the river bed except perhaps some medieval to modern material from more recent visitors. Balch's work was well documented and authenticated, so there was every reason to expect that anything we found would, therefore, be dateable not only to the period but also to the century by comparison with known items.

Fig. 5.4 A mud-filled human skull is carefully brought ashore by Ted Mason, 10 April 1948. Photo by Luke Devenish



Positive or absolute dating is only one aspect of an archaeological investigation, however. Another important aim is to build up the background to objects found. How they came there and why. It is the story behind the evidence that we want and so the objects themselves are only a means to this end. In particular, we hope to find out what the people were like who may have inhabited or used the cave, the conditions in which they lived and why. Details of their skeletal remains would tell us about their stature, life expectancy, race and health, but it is also the context of such material that is needed to determine their possible way of life. How, for example, did they bury their dead?

Some skeletal remains had been washed out of the cave years ago following a flood, but from what part of the system was not known. Balch had suggested some associations with the legendary Witch of Wookey Hole Caves and, whilst he was typically matter-of-fact about such things, it was customary in his day for others to give archaeological interpretations that were either romantic or gruesome. Even he felt it possible that the bones had belonged to victims of a sacrifice; maybe they had been tied to a stake below the grotesque stalagmite supposed to be the Witch in the First Chamber, or even decapitated and thrown into the river beneath her. A not unreasonable theory given the long history of mysteries about the Great Cave, but one I wished to test against the evidence that still remained on the bed of the subterranean Axe. Cave diving all the way upstream would be necessary to prove things one way or another.



*Fig. 5.5
Ted and Dorrien Mason raise
doubts about human sacrifices
having taken place in the cave,
10 April 1948.
Photo by Luke Devenish*

Socket holes for a stake had supposedly been seen above the water's edge below the Witch; but I found no such evidence, although tell-tale marks could have been obliterated during a cave 'clean-up'. More reliable evidence was the location of the relics found by Graham Balcombe on his dives over Whitsun 1946. He had discovered the remains of three humans at the bottom of an underwater slope several yards upstream of the First Chamber in a place known as the Witch's Scullery. It seemed unlikely that any eddies could transport such remains so far against the prevailing current. So, unless the river in Romano-British times defied gravity and flowed uphill, the sacrifice theory was now doubtful. This is what brought me to the Great Cave.

I also came to reject the decapitation possibility on examining the skulls that were found by Balcombe, and later by other divers. If the heads had been cut off, one would expect to have seen evidence for this on the topmost vertebrae of any severed spinal column. For example, the atlas vertebra in the hollow under the cranium would be protected, but those immediately below like the axis cervical vertebra would not. Also, the base of the cranium or occipital would probably show scrapes and even cut marks. Although there was an absence of the smaller vertebrae washed away by floods or buried without trace, none of the eighteen skulls examined had signs of decapitation. So what was the likely reason for their profusion in the cave?

*Fig. 5.6
Human skulls and bones mount
up, giving rise to theories that
a human cemetery had existed
upstream.
Photos by Luke Devenish*

*Olive Hodgkinson subsequently
donated several of these skulls
to the Metropolitan Museum,
New York, USA*



As our work developed, the remains discovered led me to believe that there had been a specific burial ground somewhere in the cave during Romano-British times. It must have been accessible and upstream of the First Chamber. As the Second Chamber known as 'The Hall' could also be ruled out on these grounds, this left either the Third Chamber or partly submerged Fourth Chamber as sites for my cemetery. All subsequent work narrowed the spot to the Fourth which could only be reached by diving unless water levels were lowered by lifting the sluices outside.

Now, I have no doubt that the 'witch's skeleton' found by Balch in the Vestibule near the entrance, and later displayed in Wells Museum, is Early Iron Age or Romano-British because of the pottery 'milking pail' found with it. Nor do I dispute the existence of the so-called Witch of Wookey Hole for legends usually have some foundation and a dry cave would make an ideal shelter for an old recluse. Perhaps she was demented and bore the blame for everything that went wrong in the village. Our diving and discoveries found nothing to disprove this old legend just the unlikelihood of sacrifices. For some reason, the innermost chambers had been used as a communal burial ground by Romano-British peoples.

Before carrying out the search of the river bed, a scale plan was produced and mounted on linen so that every item found could be marked in. Normally, on a surface site the ground and plan is carefully laid out with a measured grid. This was impossible in our case, but lines had been laid with tallies at yard intervals along the river bed by bottom walking divers when exploring the cave. These lines were carefully surveyed and plotted onto the map so that offsets to each object recovered could be measured to locate their exact position. We found material to be in much more scattered positions than is the case with a sunken ship.

The very first skull found presented other difficulties not encountered at surface excavations. It was the skull of a young person in which the sutures joining separate parts of the cranium were partly open. It was laid on the ground ready for measurements to be recorded, teeth present or lost to be counted and any other general information. When dry it would be numbered SK1 (skull number one) and its position plotted on the map where found by the diver. So far so good; but, when I was about to pick up the cranium, it was no longer intact. Because the outside water pressure had been removed, the wet mud that filled the inside of the skull pushed the specimen apart. And when dry it is almost impossible to fit back the pieces because they will not join up as before. Some method had to be found to avoid re-occurrences of this problem.



*Fig. 5.7
A detailed underwater survey
locating the relics is made
from the Second Chamber
to the Resurgence, 1948-9.
Photo by Luke Devenish*

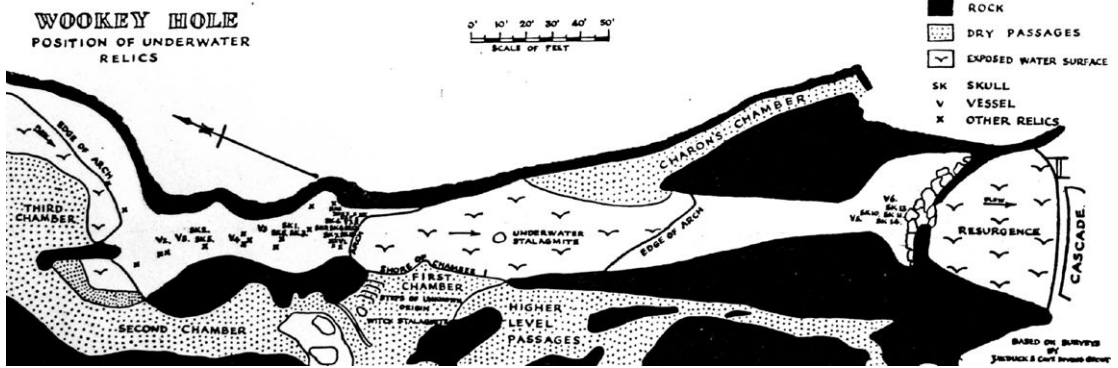


Fig. 5.8 Plan and account of the underwater survey is published in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, Vol. XCVI (1951), pp.238-43 (See Fig. 5.12)

I made a wooden open frame with a leather strap handle, large enough to take the biggest skull likely to be found. Inside was a linen bag made to the required size by my wife and nailed to the frame with brass studs. Any skull could now be carried by the diver without buffeting. A couple of boxes were added outside for lead weights, enough to produce ‘neutral buoyancy’ so that the frame could be propelled about 3 feet above the river bed. The woodwork was painted black and white so that it could be more easily seen in a mud cloud. As soon as it arrived onshore, the mud was washed out of the inside of the skull whilst it was held firmly within the frame, and we had no more problems regarding drying out.

Trial trenches in the Third Chamber across two mud banks that were the most likely burial sites produced no evidence. It was obvious that the sediment where any burials may have taken place had long since been washed out by floods. Rising water after heavy rains on Mendip also causes the famous ‘noises’ of Wookey Hole as trapped air gets displaced from one partly submerged chamber to the next and the ‘gloop’ is amplified. The Fourth Chamber is one such place and, as Balch had done earlier, it was agreed that the sluices outside would be opened so that we could look at the mud banks inside. Accompanied by Olive Hodgkinson and Luke Devenish, I helped steer the boat under the now open arch and began to excavate the older silt of an exposed bank. Within half-an-inch of the top we found some small fragments of a skull, neck bones and one upper arm in juxtaposition with two beads resting on the neck. Although the rest of the skeleton had been washed away by floods, I now felt sure that the Fourth Chamber had been the burial ground and source of the other finds downstream. So, it was through an old cemetery that cave divers set out to explore the unknown reaches of the subterranean River Axe. This has since been substantiated by Professor E.K. Tratman’s findings already cited in the previous chapter.



Fig. 5.9 Ted Mason’s human ‘skull carrier’, designed to prevent disintegration on surfacing and drying out, 19/20 June 1948. Photo by Luke Devenish

The eighteen skulls we recovered by diving downstream of the cemetery were probably our most notable finds. All but two of them exhibited the characteristics of Romano-British peoples, similar to those of the earlier Iron Age marsh village near Glastonbury. Two were different, however, so we used to call our eighteen people the sixteen ‘locals’ and two ‘lodgers’. Other finds were various pots and two lead ewers. Many of the bones and vessels are displayed with my skull carrier in the Caves Museum¹².

¹² The skull carrier is now in Wells & Mendip Museum.

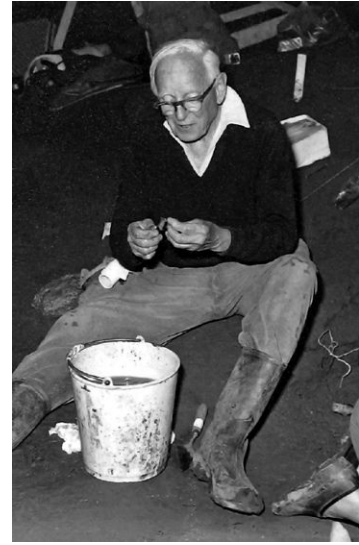
More recent material was also found, of course. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, for instance, it was common for small parties to dine in the Third Chamber with wine. Apparently, some must have thrown their empties into the river for we found two bottles. One was completely empty but the other was corked and, being half-filled, was resting at an inclined angle on the submerged bank. Alas, it contained no vintage wine, merely dirty river water that had seeped in.

Having discovered all we could on the river bed and proved that the Fourth Chamber was a burial ground, and maybe the Third too, we decided to probe into the sediment beneath. But how could we stop any dig filling almost as quickly as you dug? So, I hit on the idea, unsuccessful I'm afraid, of scouring the surface of the river bed by means of pressure jets. Why not try the pump used for washing down the show cave? So, two divers went into the water in the First Chamber where, with the cave fully illuminated and the underwater lights on, we could watch the effects of the experiment. They held the nozzle of the pipe in position against the river bed and the pump was switched on.

The effects were certainly quite dramatic; in fact, one might say artistic! The two divers poised for action and holding the hose between them suddenly lifted off their feet. With the natural tendency to hang on to anything, instead of letting go of the hose they gripped it more tightly and, jet propelled, they made a complete circle in a kind of underwater flight. But that was not all. The circle was only a prelude of delights to come. The two man subaqua ballet performed spirals, figures-of-eight and graceful curvilinear dives in all directions. With the hose constantly weaving and the attractive green tint of the water, their performance was quite spectacular and a welcome change. Someone standing next to me muttered: 'Ballet Russe should have seen this!' I was so engrossed and moved that I have forgotten who the performers were. But I do remember the thought crossing my mind that, if only Olive had seen it, she would have realised its potential immediately. Imagine cave divers staging subaqua ballets to audiences seated around the Witch's Kitchen. A much nicer attraction than stories about sacrifices!

The pump operator had been so fascinated, too, that he could not take his eyes off the fun and forgot to turn off the pump. At last the divers managed to let go and, as they struggled to the shore, very dizzy no doubt, the hose slowly sank writhing like a snake and spraying fountains of white water everywhere. It was a finale that clinched its failure as an archaeologist's aid. And the divers didn't think much of the ballet idea either!

Before abandoning the aptly named 'Operation Sandblast', however, we toyed with various ideas. What if we reduced the pressure to enable divers to keep their feet? Well it helped a little but did not overcome the great bugbear of underwater archaeology that we faced: the mud cloud. You had only to kneel down for a few minutes searching for relics, and the cloud would swirl like curling cotton wool around you; first the knees, then all over and gradually thicker so that the powerful light at your side turned from brilliant white through stages to orange to deep red and finally invisible as if going out. We thought of covering the jet with a glass box and even using underwater fans to disperse the clouds, but they were obviously impractical. As archaeologists we could not use



*Fig. 5.10
Professor Edgar K. Tratman at work in the Fourth Chamber. 'Trat' led the subsequent archaeological excavation by the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society during 1973-76, proving that the chamber had been used as a cemetery. Photo from Wookey Hole Museum*

the ‘mud racing’ tactics of the exploring divers. We consoled ourselves that the material embedded in the mud was unlikely to add much that was new to the story of Wookey Holes Caves. Yet, who knows. Maybe if like Jacques Cousteau we had thought of sucking-up the mud through filtered pipes, there would be more to tell. ‘Operation Vacuum Clean’ perhaps?

All the cave diving ‘ops’ at Wookey Hole Caves attracted quite a lot of publicity, for the newspapers, film and television companies never tired of new stories to cover, whether about discoveries or the human remains found. Olive Hodgkinson masterminded a lot of these, of course. There was a Pathé Pictorial Newsreel filming session, though few of us saw it screened, and another by Twentieth Century in a series of support pictures with the dreadful title: ‘Spotlight on Danger Men’! On another occasion, we refused to follow a prepared script by a young television entertainer who wished to introduce hyaenas and Old Stone Age finds into the Great Cave, things that had never been found there. I was always relieved when Dan Hasell managed to tone things down, usually by ruling out certain diving scenes as unsafe and suggesting his own instead. It always worked!

I think that Wookey Hole Caves was the first underground location from which a live television broadcast was made in this country when the BBC gave a factual report on our underwater archaeological work. Bob Davies joined us for the filming and a ‘talking rope’ was used to broadcast from underwater. On this occasion, everything had to be carefully set up because there could be no editing of what ‘went out’. The script was narrated by Cliff Michelmore in the First Chamber. As he introduced the report, the cameraman would pan to the Witch’s stalagmite as he came to the words:

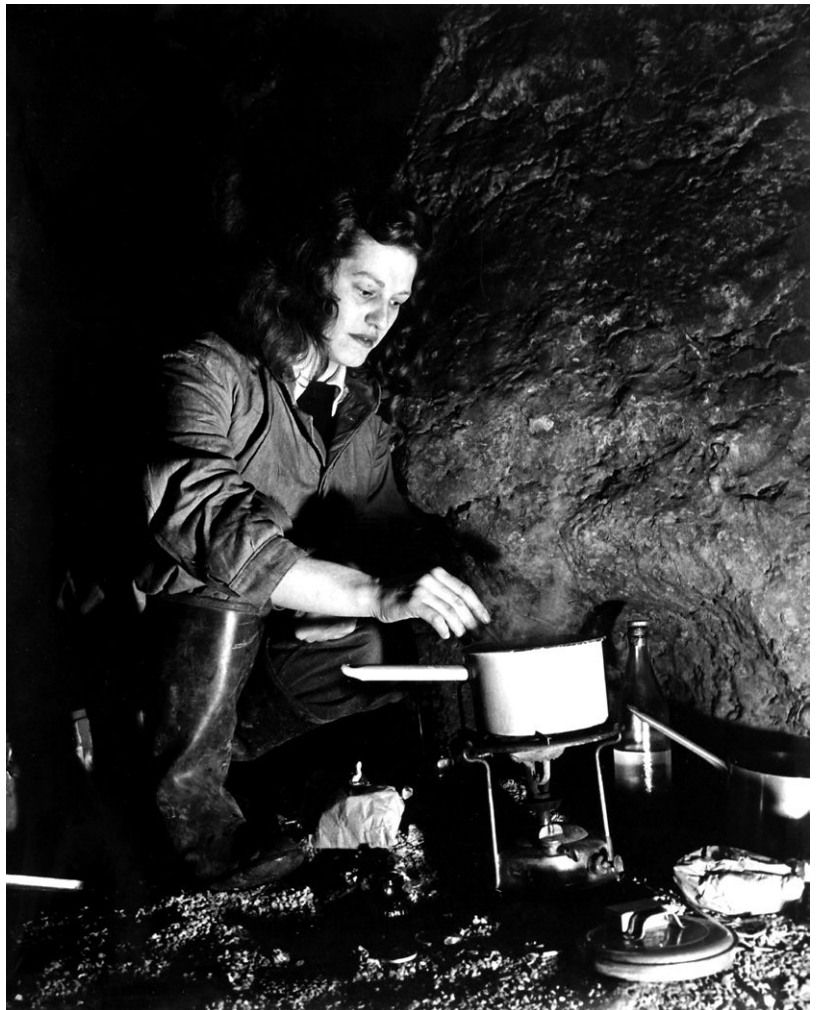


Fig. 5.11
Dorrien Mason at work in
the Witch's Kitchen, 1949.
Photo by Luke Devenish

'Here we have the Witch of Wookey', then down to the shore where my wife Dorrien was sorting relics, around the chamber in silence and then back for him to pick up the next part of the story. But one of the cameramen suggested playing a trick and, as it was not an insult to the narrator, we agreed. When he came to the key phrase, the camera actually zoomed in on Dorrien! Fortunately, the flabbergasted narrator had time to compose himself before the camera returned to him.

So, jokes about the Witch have become more commonplace than stories about sacrifices to her. All the old generation of divers used to spit on her for luck as they passed her to start a diving 'op'! Olive herself would sometimes put on a grotesque mask and wig to scare visitors she was escorting around the cave. She knew exactly how to strike a balance between the lure of the Great Cave and its challenge to cave divers. Moreover, Olive Hodgkinson was at pains not to sacrifice her cave for she appreciated the appeal of the unspoiled and unknown as we did. After Wing Commander Gerard Hodgkinson died in October 1960, aged 77, Olive continued to encourage and entertain cave divers although, as we shall see later, owing to changes in diving techniques at the time, there was virtually no cave diving at Wookey Hole from 1962 to 1966. In 1971 she published her own version of *The Story of Wookey Hole*, and wrote:

In 1928 [actually 1927] my husband began the process of opening the Caves to the general public on a commercial basis. I hesitate to use the word commercial because it conjures up the wrong impression. Visitors to Wookey Hole comment frequently on the fact that the whole place has remained unspoiled in spite of the vast numbers who come here yearly, and since my husband's death I have striven to comply with his ideas that although Wookey Hole is one of the great attractions, if not of the whole world, certainly of Great Britain, the whole place should remain as unspoiled as possible.

Olive left Wookey Hole shortly afterwards in 1973, so ending the hundred year dynasty of Hodgkinsons in the village. Sadly, her retirement to Jersey was brief but typically memorable. When Jim Hanwell visited her there, the showpiece in the lovely garden was a swimming pool designed with underwater lights to resemble the view from the Third Chamber in Wookey Hole Caves towards the Fourth and that part of the Great Cave that was the preserve of the cave divers. They spent the evening looking and reminiscing¹³.

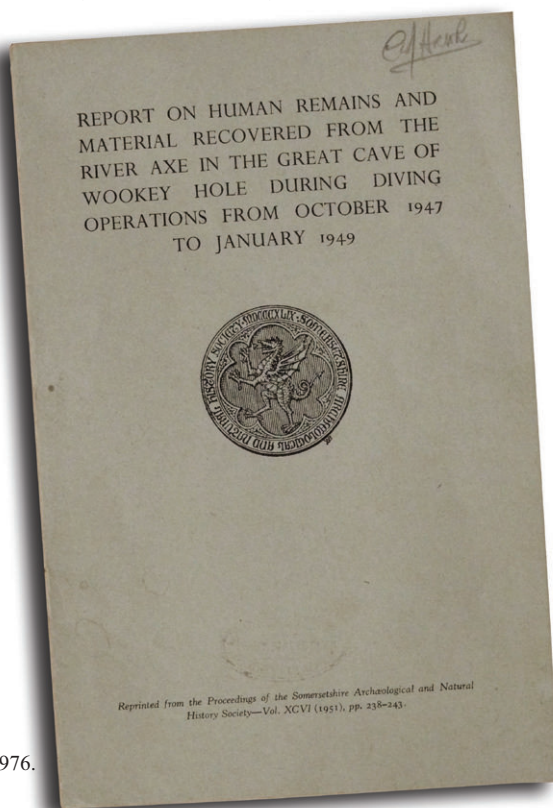


Fig. 5.12
Ted and Dorrien Mason's
Report as 'Joint Archaeological
Controllers' of the Somerset
Section, Cave Diving Group
excavations in Wookey Hole,
1947-49.
From Christopher Hawkes

¹³ Olive Hodgkinson died in 1976.



*Fig. 5.13
Bob Davies brings out 'the skull which disintegrated'.
Photo by Luke Devenish*