

THE EXCAVATIONS BY LANCASTER CAVE AND MINE RESEARCH SOCIETY IN AND AROUND HEYSHAM HEAD CAVE

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Abstract

Members of Lancaster Cave and Mine Research Society were responsible for archaeological investigations at a number of cave sites across Cumbria and North West Lancashire during the 1960s and 1970s. One of their excavations was in a cave/rock shelter on Heysham Head. The results of this excavation were not published at the time. The presence of a layer very rich in the shells of the common whelk suggests human activity at the site prior to its use as a refuse tip in the late-nineteenth century. Areas of the site were left undisturbed for future investigation.

The excavations

The Lancaster Cave and Mine Research Society (LCMRS) was founded on the 22 March 1967 by Pete Cumpsty and Peter Ashmead with the intention of providing much-needed clarity and structure to cave exploration and recording in the Morecambe Bay region (Murphy & Moseley 2020). Cavers from several caving clubs and also non-cavers with useful relevant skills and expertise such as photography and illustration were recruited and brought together, modelling (as the name suggests) the aims and organisation of the already well-established Northern Cavern and Mine Research Society. The Society intended to avoid a purely sporting caver image but to have a more scientific, archaeological and exploratory approach. So began a programme of investigations into the mines, caves and karst features of the area. It was never a large club, having a maximum of about twenty members but it did undertake significant research including several cave archaeological excavations (Ashmead and Baldwin undated; Murphy and Moseley in press). This note gives an overview of the archaeological work undertaken by the Society in Heysham Head Cave and ensures that the results of this work are available to the archaeological community.

The only site around Heysham to merit an entry in the cavers guide book covering the area is Heysham Beach Cave (SD40856171), an 11m-long cave at the base of the sea cliff on the north of Heysham Head (Allshorn & Swire 2017, 451). It is formed in the Carboniferous-age Millstone Grit Group strata and not in the Triassic-age St Bees Sandstone as is listed in Allshorn and Swire (2017). The Society recorded the cave as being blocked by large boulders. This cave was visited, recorded and surveyed by members of the LCMRS during 1967 as part of a wider speleological investigation of the Heysham area though only a sketch survey is preserved in the records.

However, the attention of the Society was drawn to another site close to the summit of Heysham Head Hill at SD41036147. This is a rock shelter between large blocks (Figure 1) with three entrances and it was named Heysham Head Cave by the LCMRS (Ashmead 1969). The cave was known locally as The Hermits Cave but is also referred to as Heysham Rock Shelter. The cave was first visited and surveyed by Duncan Baldwin and Peter Ashmead on the 10 July 1967. Following permission from the Rev. R A Gillespie, Rector of St Peter's Church in Heysham from 1956 to 1978, excavation commenced in August 1967 with a trial trench at the southern entrance (Figure 2). After the removal of litter, a layer containing numerous fragments of pottery and glass was underlain by a layer containing abundant whelk shells (Figure 3). The excavation was expanded to cover around half of the rock shelter's floor. It showed the same basic stratigraphy with a further layer, beneath the whelk-rich layer, of coarse sand with occasional 'erratics' (usually meaning Lake District Lower Palaeozoic lithologies in LCMRS reports) overlying bedrock.

Activity then moved to the terrace area outside the cave. A trial trench showed a stratigraphy similar to that found within the cave, and the succession was underlain by a blocky layer containing a lens of

yellow clay. Blocks became more numerous with depth until a depth of 1.5m was reached without confirmed bedrock having been reached. Finds were less common than in the cave though whelk shells and pottery were found and were interpreted as having gravitated to their present position through fissures in the cave walls. The excavation outside the cave was extended for the full extent of the terrace reaching a ruined wall by to the north entrance. The trenches were backfilled and landscaped.

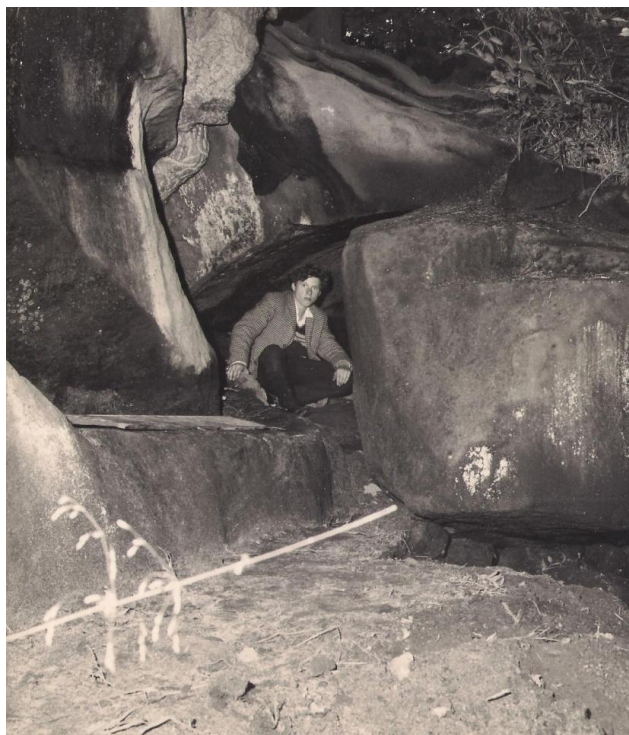


Figure 1. Duncan Baldwin of the LCMRS in the south entrance to Heysham Head Cave taken in July 1967. Source: Ashmead archive (with permission).

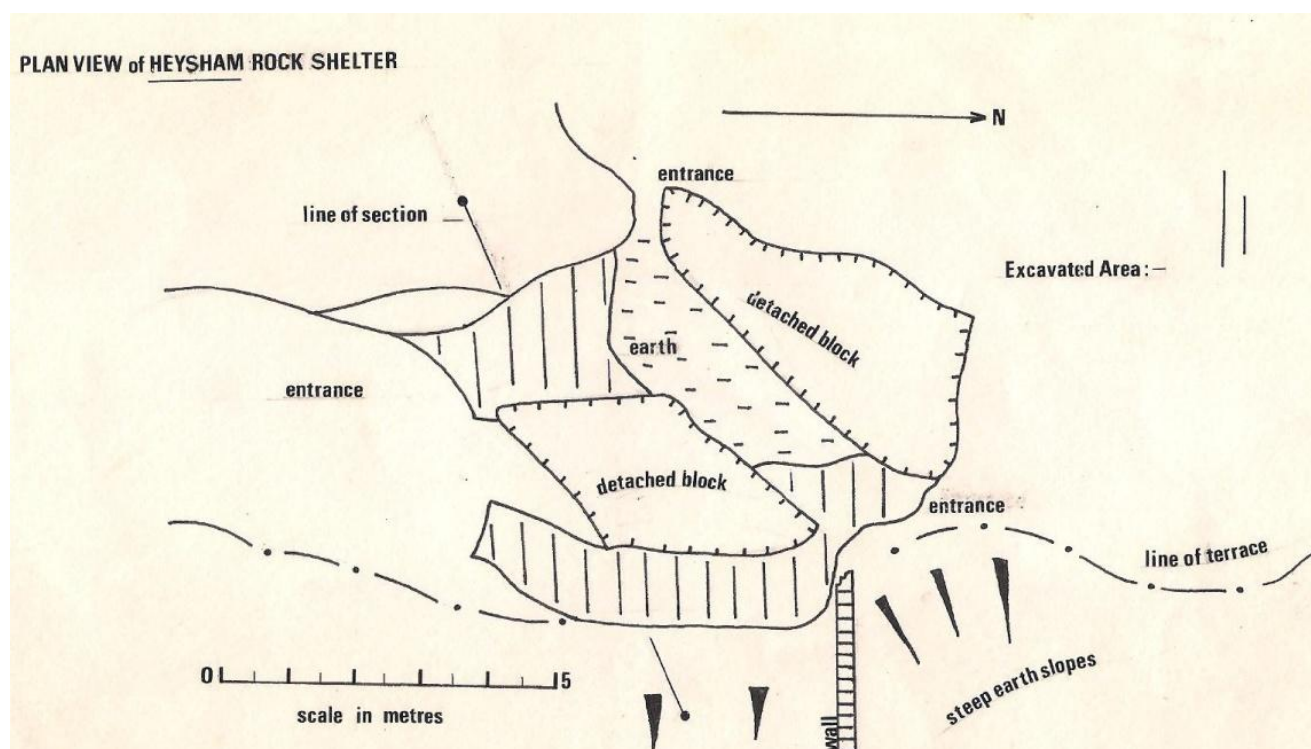


Figure 2. Plan of Heysham Head Cave showing the extent of the LCMRS excavations. Source: Ashmead archive (with permission)

Objects recovered consisted of glass, pottery and a clay-pipe stem which were identified as belonging to the latter part of the nineteenth or early-twentieth centuries and they suggest that the cave was used as a rubbish dump during these times. The whelk shells recovered were mainly of the common or edible whelk, *Buccinum undatum*. Identification was undertaken by C P Nutall of the British Museum and communicated to R H Wood of the City of Lancaster Museum in a letter dated the 10 February 1969. There was a dominance of one species that was not associated with other shallow-water shellfish remains – only minor amounts of fragmented mussel and cockle shells were recovered. This is suggested as indicative of human action rather than being a natural beach deposit. The condition and appearance of the whelk shells suggested that they were of recent age rather than being associated with raised-beach deposits, according to R H Wood of the LCMRS in his letter (dated 1 February 1969) to the British Museum requesting their identification. The search for evidence of Pleistocene raised-beach deposits was an underlying theme of the geomorphological work of LCMRS and presumably was a factor in undertaking the excavation described here (Ashmead 1969 & 1974, 43).

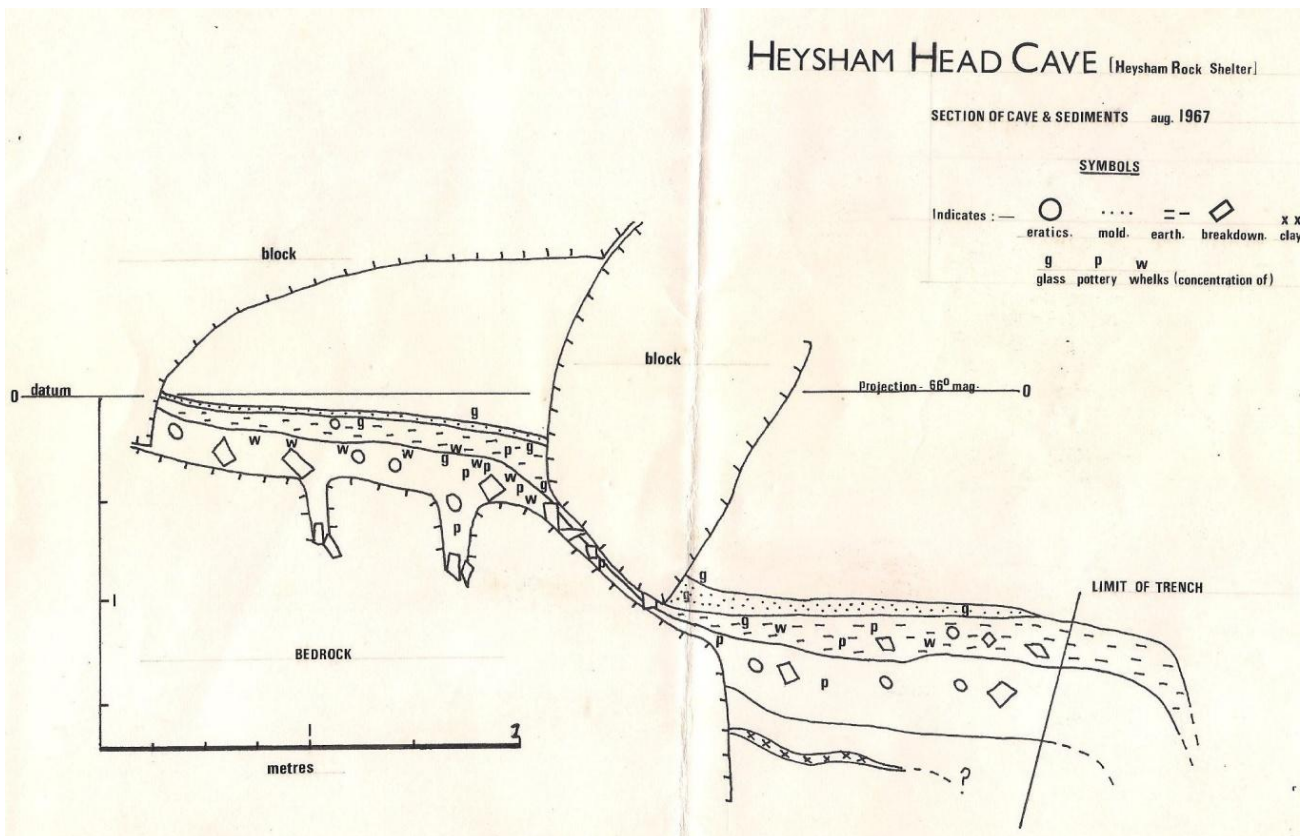


Figure 3. Section of Heysham Head Cave along the ‘line of section’ marked on Figure 2 showing the stratigraphy. The surface layer labelled ‘mold’ is not mentioned in the account of the excavation. It may refer to decaying leaf litter. Source: Original copy from the Ashmead archive (with permission).

Conclusions

The Lancaster Cave and Mine Research Society undertook an archaeological excavation in and around a cave/rock shelter on Heysham Head in 1967. The results of this work revealed a layer rich in edible whelk shells overlain by late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century refuse dumping and underlain by coarser materials containing erratic lithologies suggesting, at least in part, a possible glacial origin. The abundance, preservation and lack of diversity of the shellfish assemblage in the shell-rich layer suggest an origin in human activity rather than as part of a raised-beach deposit. The publication of this account of the LCMRS’s activities in Heysham Head Cave will hopefully inspire further work on these enigmatic deposits.

Endnote

Dimensions are given in the units and style of the original documentation.

Acknowledgements

Much of this paper is based on letters, notes, surveys and other papers in the Ashmead archive and it includes all the relevant and important details recorded there. Grateful thanks are given to the family and estate of Peter Ashmead and especially Sue Kennedy for access to these resources.

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