REPORT

Creswell Crags

In the summer of 2009, the opening of a big new visitor centre marked a welcome step forward for Creswell Crags, on the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire border close to Worksop. The recent discovery of cave art at Creswell hugely raised its profile, and the whole site has now been greatly improved as befits an important archaeological location. The road that ran through the crags has been diverted away, the old sewage works is long gone, and the landscaped parkland now offers a lovely walk, with or without a visit into the caves.

Creswell Crags lie within the Permian Cadeby Formation (once the Magnesian Limestone), where a wide ravine cuts through a low wooded ridge east of a small fault scarp. Its stream never ran underground, but restricted dissolution of the dolomitic rock has merely etched out fissures and rifts along joints that lie near the surface, and especially in those that open into gorge walls. So the Creswell Crags are liberally punctured by caves along the walls on both sides of the stream; and all are short caverns, sealed by mud at the back, with dry floors and arched roofs. They made ideal dwelling caves for man or animal.

Following Anglian ice retreat, the Creswell caves were occupied mostly by hyenas - scavengers who would drag large chunks of carcasses back to their cave dens. Discarded bones survived inside the caves, thereby creating a collection of the remains of almost all the large animals that had been there in the Pleistocene. There were mammoths, woolly rhinoceros and reindeer from the colder periods, when glaciers occupied valleys not far to the north, while hippopotamus, horse and lion were left from times of warmer climates. Bone-rich sediments were metres deep in some of the caves, and made quite decent "cave earth" floors for subsequent human occupations.

The raised walkway inside Church Hole at about the level of the original cave floor, prior to the Victorian excavations; it was installed recently to take visitors up to where the cave art can be seen.

During warmer interludes in the early Devensian, itinerant hunters periodically took shelter in the Creswell caves, leaving behind crude stone tools. Then, about 12,500 years ago, after the main Devensian cold stage was over, cave dwellers returned to Creswell's rock shelters, especially those along the north side of the gorge where they could catch more of the warm sunshine. These were more sophisticated people; they were even into producing art. A fragment of rib bone, just 7 cm long and beautifully engraved with a horse's head, is perhaps the most famous of the many artefacts that have led to the distinctive post-glacial culture being named the Creswellian. It was found in 1876 among the floor debris in the fancifully named Robin Hood's Cave, which lies in the southern wall of the Creswell Crags, and is therefore likely to have been one of the occupied caves in Creswellian times.

Evening light reaches the limestone crags along the southern side of Creswell Crags; Boat House Cave lies at water level at the near end of the crags, and Church Hole is out of sight among the trees near the far end.

Modest indentations on the wall of Church Hole, which required skilled interpretation to identify as the work of Creswellian cave artists (photo: English Heritage).

Next people into the caves were the Victorian antiquarians, who relished sites where they could excavate huge quantities of well-preserved bones from what had been simple hyena dens. In the southern wall of Creswell Crags, Church Hole was excavated in the 1870s. Removal of huge amounts of bones and debris lowered the entire cave floor by more than two metres, though still did not reach a rock floor. The cave walls of Creswellian times were therefore left out of reach up near the ceiling. The Victorians had seen nothing of interest on those walls, and later visitors could not get close to them.

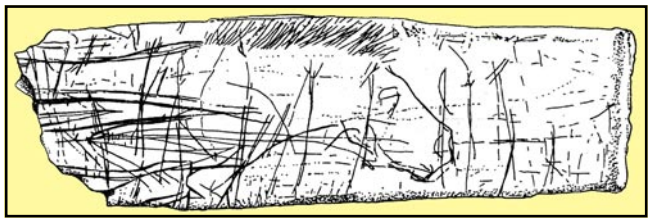
The efforts of Creswellian artists were not seen or appreciated until 2003. Only then did a small group of specialists (Paul Bahn, Paul Pettitt and Sergio Ripoll) visit Church Hole during their nationwide search for cave art. They had a lucky break when one of them

The head and beak of the ibis that are clearly recognisable on the wall of Church Hole (photo: English Heritage).

looked at just the right angle at a piece of wall that was side-lit by daylight from the entrance. Shadows picked out a few lines etched into the rock, which they recognised as the work of a bygone artist. They looked further, and found the remnants of more than a dozen artworks in that one entrance chamber. A bison and a stag, each two metres long, appear only as engraved outlines, while the distinctive beak of an ibis is cut deeper into a fine bas relief. But the relatively soft and friable dolomitic limestone has weathered badly in a cave chamber long open to the weather. Perhaps once the engraved lines were the outlines of paintings, but no colour survives. In Church Hole you have to be shown the right spots and then need to look very carefully to see the cave art.

Dating of a thin stalagmite coating that covers some of the engraved lines, and of associated charcoal, both indicate ages of about 12,000 years, so this is definitely Creswellian art, and it is the most northerly cave art yet found. Already significant, Creswell Crags is now a site of even greater note, and a landmark within the East Midlands.

Tony Waltham



The horse's head that was engraved onto a piece of bone by a Creswellian artist before being lost among the debris on the floor of Robin Hood's Cave (drawing: English Heritage).