

The Great Wheel Pit Mystery

by R. M. Taviner

In 1896, an increase in pressure caused by the construction of a dam upstream of the St. Cuthbert's Lead Works, triggered a sudden catastrophic collapse in the base of a '*deep pond on the hill near the Miners' Arms, which till then had sent its overflow down a swallet* [1]'. According to local hearsay, the event caused significant contamination of Rodney Stoke Rising, and the aftermath of the collapse was captured in several photographs held in Wells Museum. A copy of one is viewable on the MCRA site, under the title Wheel Pit.

Stanton later identified this site with the '*Deep grassy depression, with small stream from Waldegrave Pond entering partly choked tunnel under road, roof held up by old tramway*' and offered the alternative name of Wheal Pit [2]. This is clearly the large swallet adjacent to the road, located midway between Waldegrave Pond and Five Buddles Sink, which swallows the ponds intermittent but occasionally large overflow. The tramway rails were presumably installed to help prevent the road above from collapsing.

However, in 'A Man Deep in Mendip' p.53, it says that JHS, HEB & Co went to Priddy Mines to photograph '*Wheel Pit and Priddy mines swallets, the latter was encroaching on the road badly. The third swallet in this group - the little swallet under the pines (Priddy Pool or Waldegrave Swallet) was choked*'. Later, on p.108, JHS mentions '*Down on to the road, the Wheelpit swallet was dry, the big one running a little*'. Finally on p.126, JHS records '*Then on to the minery, round the ponds to the Wheel Pit and Road Swallets* [3]'. There are later separate entries for Waldegrave Swallet which JHS dug for some time.

It's clear from this that the site Savory refers to as Wheel Pit is actually the modern Five Buddles Sink, and Clement Richardson, one of the early Waldegrave Swallet diggers, also recognised the Five Buddles site as Wheel Pit. This also matches the old maps of the area, which show '*Wheel Pits*' clearly marked on either side of the road. What Stanton called Wheel Pit, JHS was calling either Priddy Mines Swallet or Road Swallet, and other commentators later called this site Chewton Minery Swallet, which seems an altogether better name for it.

Finally, during work at Five Buddles Sink in 1995, the actual wheel pit was discovered, which coupled with Savory's diary entries, was enough to convince Tony Jarratt (among others) that this really was the true Wheel Pit – a theory that even Stanton (who was also responsible for christening Five Buddles Sink), was apparently happy to accept [4].

Armed with two of the photographs which captured the aftermath of the catastrophic event, I wandered over to the mineries to see if I could actually match any of the features. Both are presented below.

Obviously much has changed in the intervening 118 years, but I was able to positively identify the spots from which both photos were taken - which are indeed views of the large swallet by the road, commonly called Wheel Pit.



It is not entirely clear why Stanton mislabelled this site. He claims that he wasn't aware of the site of the actual wheel pit at the time [5], yet Richardson had clearly pointed it out to him several years earlier [6]. He may have been influenced by the photographs held in Wells Museum, and may have interpreted the name Wheel Pits as a collective name for the area, as suggested by the old maps which clearly use the label Wheel Pits (plural). Whatever the cause, the swallet commonly called Wheel Pit is clearly mislabelled and there must now be a strong case for the MCRA to reclassify the swallet either as Priddy Mines Swallet, Road Swallet, or preferably Chewton Minery Swallet, with the term Wheel Pit reassigned as an alternative to Five Buddles Sink. Then again, even though it's technically incorrect, any further change may just make things even more confusing than they are already!

Finally, the following old map, clearly shows both the exact location and the extent of the pool that collapsed suddenly in 1896. Stanton's Wheel Pit (and the now vanished surrounding pool) is marked with a red dot, while the green dot indicates the position of Five Buddles Sink (complete with seven buddles!). The location of Stock's House is also visible nearby.



References

[1] H. E. Balch, Mendip — Its Swallet Caves and Rock Shelters, John Wright and Sons Ltd (Bristol), Simpkin, Marshall (1941) Ltd. London, 2nd edition (1948).

[2] N. Barrington and W. I. Stanton, Mendip — The Complete Caves and a View of the Hills, Barton Publications, Cheddar Valley Press, Cheddar, Somerset, 3rd revised edition (1977).

[3] J. Savory, A Man Deep In Mendip, The Caving Diaries of Harry Savory 1910-1921, Alan Sutton, Gloucester (1989).

[4] A. R. Jarratt, In Search of Thomas Bushell's Lost Swallow, BEC Belfry Bull 481 p.17 (1995).

[5] W. I. Stanton Logbook Vol.20 p.48 (14th August 1995)
Available to view at www.mcra.org.uk

[6] W. I. Stanton Logbook Vol.12 p.11 (12th May 1970)
Available to view at www.mcra.org.uk