

Blagdon Bone Fissure

by R. M. Taviner

In 1872, miners' prospecting for iron ore on the slopes above Blagdon, intersected a fissure, containing Pleistocene bones. Unfortunately the mine was filled in before it could be properly investigated, and the following account didn't appear in the Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists' Society until some years later.

There were exhibited some bones of Cave Mammals from Blagdon, which Mr. Sherwood Smith had presented to the Museum. They came from a fissure in the New Red Conglomerate, and from a depth of forty feet; they were found sinking for iron ore. The miners unfortunately did not pursue the fissure in a N.W or S.E. direction, in which case more bones might have been found. As the fissure was apparently closed at the surface it is possible that they just cut the far end or branch of some cavern. There is a small shallow valley about fifty yards to the W. of the sinking, and there may possibly exist there an opening covered up by debris from the ridge above. This small pit was near the top of the Blackdown ridge, above the village of Blagdon, Somersetshire. Owing to it being six miles from a railway those who had been to see it did not hear in time that the sinking had been filled up. It is a cause of regret that the opportunity for making further explorations was thus lost. The bones were a Vertebra of Bos, three molar teeth of Rhinoceros, and the distal end of Femur of the same.

This remains the only contemporary account of the discovery, and on the face of it there doesn't seem to be a great deal of information to go on. However closer examination reveals a number of significant pertinent facts, which we can use to help guide us to the correct location.

Fact 1 – The fissure was in '*New Red Conglomerate*' (i.e. Dolomitic Conglomerate). This is important, because not only must the prospective site be surrounded by the right type of rock - it also helps to define the southern boundary of the search area.

Fact 2 - We have a specific location – '*This small pit was near the top of the Blackdown ridge, above the village of Blagdon*'. This is self-explanatory, and tells us that it was a small local concern (only 40 feet deep), near the top of the ridge above Blagdon. The '*top of Blackdown ridge*' is a little vague, but we already know that it cannot extend south of the Dolomitic Conglomerate. It should also be noted that the account specifically locates the pit '*above*' Blagdon, rather than above and to the west or east of the village. Given that the report already includes some other very specific directional pointers (N.W, S.E and W.), this would be a strange omission, and it allows us to contain the east-west search area to within reasonable proportions. Otherwise the narrator would surely have recorded that the site lay above the villages of Rickford or Ubley instead.

Fact 3 – There was '*a small shallow valley about fifty yards to the W. of the sinking*'. This is possibly the most important directional fact of all, because it tells us that it wasn't *in* a valley, but a specific distance outside. This fact alone allows us to rule out several possible contenders.

Fact 4 – The '*sinking had been filled up*'. The shaft was backfilled. This allows us to rule out any open shafts.

The mine was probably the work of T. S. Smith of the Bristol Mineral Company in the 1870s, as recorded in Earth Colours. E. K. Tratman was the first to search for it, but was unsuccessful, and there have been a number of subsequent attempts, none of which have turned up anything definitive. However, a number of possible locations have been suggested, and these are examined from west to east.



Map showing the location of the sites discussed in relation to Blagdon

Location 1 (FULLER'S HAY) – Fuller's Hay is the large expanse of private woodland covering the southern flank of Rickford Combe. Towards the eastern extremity there is a long tongue of Dolomitic Conglomerate which curls southward up the hillside behind Blagdon, and some commentators have suggested that the small valley that runs up its centre may be a potential location for the missing fissure. However, this suggestion really doesn't stand up to close scrutiny.

Is conglomerate present? – Yes. However the fact that it is *entirely* conglomerate tends to count against it, as any iron is *most* likely to be found in the ferruginous unconformity between the limestone and the conglomerate. There is no limestone present.

Is there any sign of a filled shaft on open ground with a small valley 50 yards to the west? – There is a small valley present, but there are no obvious surface fissures, while the only sign of mining is located low down on the west (i.e. wrong) side of the valley. Very little mining appears to have been carried out in this vicinity, although there are a few minor workings further west, near the cottages.

Is it situated above Blagdon? – Even the most ardent advocate of Fuller's Hay would be hard pressed to locate this area 'above Blagdon.' The small valley lies at the eastern end of the wood, but even this section is more than 500m west of Street End, and if anything, lies at much the same altitude. Furthermore, because of the topographical relationship, it seems much more likely that the author of the report would have associated any mines in this area with Rickford Combe, rather than with a village located over the next rise.

Location 2 (SWANCOMBE WOOD) – Swancombe Wood is a narrow, wooded defile situated on the hillside above the eastern extremity of Blagdon. The valley is almost entirely in Dolomitic Conglomerate, although limestone is evident on the eastern edge. Stanton records that there were several trial haematite workings backfilled in this vicinity, although very little sign of mining now remains. The workings certainly weren't open when he visited, so this assertion is presumably based on local knowledge, or childhood recollections. The BEC surveyed a dig in 1947 in 'Swancombe Hollow', but any details, including the survey, are now lost to us.

Is conglomerate present? – Yes.

Is there any sign of a filled shaft on open ground with a small valley 50 yards to the west? – There is a patch of gorse at roughly the right distance from the valley, which must lie close to the unconformable junction between the limestone and conglomerate. It's possible that this is the site of a backfilled shaft.

Is it situated above Blagdon? – Yes, albeit 500m east of the village centre.



*Map showing the location of the sites discussed in relation to the Dolomitic Conglomerate (pink)
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Location 3 (MEREKOMBE WOOD) – Merecombe Wood is another narrow, wooded defile, but situated on the hillside much further east. The upper part is in limestone, while the lower part of the valley is in Dolomitic Conglomerate. There is one open (undescended) shaft, and at least two other filled ones nearby, plus some evidence of mining in the fields further east.

Is conglomerate present? – Yes, but only in the lower part of the valley. The upper part of the wood, which contains the mineshafts, appears to be entirely in limestone, as does the mined area further east.

Is there any sign of a filled shaft on open ground with a small valley 50 yards to the west? – Possibly, but it appears to be in limestone rather than in the pre-requisite conglomerate.

Is it situated above Blagdon? – Not really. Blagdon church *is* visible from the nearby fields, but the valley still lies 1.3 km east of Blagdon, midway between the village and Ubley.

All three traditionally attributed sites match at least some of the criteria, but none are entirely convincing when taken in the round. Fuller's Hay and Merecombe Wood are simply too remote geographically, especially the latter, which lies well over 1km east of the village. Furthermore, the mines in this area appear to lie above the contact with the Dolomitic Conglomerate, and the site may be compromised further still by the existence of an open shaft, which the author would surely have recorded. It may of course, have collapsed afterwards, but there is no clear evidence to support this. Swancombe Wood on the other hand is a much better fit, but even that lies 500m east of the village centre.

Location 4 (STREET END) – This small, circular clump of bushes is located in a field at **ST 4999 5836**, and presumably marks the position of an old shaft.



Location 4 – The suggested true site of Blagdon Bone Fissure (ST 4999 5836)
Blagdon church is visible immediately to the left of the 'filled up' shaft

Unlike the other contenders, it lies directly above Blagdon, *and* precisely 50 yards east of a small valley. Conglomerate is certainly present, and the site appears to lie very close to the favourable ferruginous contact with the limestone. The Street End site is the only one that appears to meet the criteria in every regard, and while Swancombe Wood remains an outside possibility, I would suggest that this shaft ... or at least another very near to it ... is the true location of Blagdon Bone Fissure.

POSTSCRIPT - The author has since learned that Manganese was recorded at this exact same spot during the early 1980s. Unfortunately that earlier explorer was searching for something other than the lost cave, and understandably failed to make the connection. Furthermore, back then the site was far less obvious than it is today, and consisted merely of a small pile of bramble covered rocks, which was interpreted as a temporary feature resulting from field clearance. It's clear now that this wasn't the case, otherwise it would have been removed long ago.

REFERENCES

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