

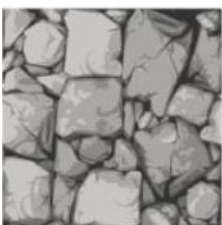
Norton Radstock, Coal Mining and Mendip Rocks

The museum at Norton Radstock began life in 1973 when a group of local people wanted to recognise the work of the Somerset miners and their contribution to Britain's heritage. The result is an extensive collection of artefacts from Somerset's coal mining history. It is believed that coal was mined in north Somerset during Roman times and there is documentary evidence of mining in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Museum is housed in the restored Radstock Old Market Hall. With galleries on two floors you can learn about blacksmithing, coal mining, shoe and boot making, printing and local breweries. The coal-bearing land was owned by a small number of families (Duchy of Cornwall, Waldegrave, Earl of Warwick being three of them). Development of the coalfield brought them great wealth.



In north Somerset, the coal does not occur in thick seams, so to reduce unnecessary digging, it was mined in tunnels and low galleries supported by props and linings of stone, timber or steel. In the late eighteenth century, the coal was transported by the Somersetshire Coal Canal. 100 years later, it was closed down, having been superseded by the developing network of railways – the Wilts Somerset & Weymouth railway for Radstock and Frome; and the Bristol & North Somerset railway serving the Clutton collieries, both becoming part of the Great Western Railway. The Somerset and Dorset line provided another valuable link between Bath and Bournemouth. A walk around part of the coalfield was organised as part of the annual Mendip Rocks festival. This took in part of the Kilmersdon Incline. The incline was constructed in 1877 to exchange coal at the siding of the GWR Frome to Radstock railway. It was in operation until 1973 and was the last gravity-operated incline in the country. Kilmersdon Colliery was one of the last collieries to close in 1973, ending 2000 years of coal mining in the Mendips. The Museum also has exhibits about printing, another significant local business and the boot and shoe industry.

The Somerset Earth Science Centre (<http://www.earthsciencecentre.org.uk/about-us>) was a key part of the Mendip Rocks festival (<http://www.mendiphillsaonb.org.uk/our-work/mendip-rocks/>).



Mendip
ROCKS!



The walk around the north Somerset coalfields was one such event - archaeology whilst not the main focus, was mostly of the industrial sort. Visits to working quarries were another popular feature – this below from a visit to the Torr Works Quarry this year. The SESC is the base from which tour groups were transported.



Juliet Lawn, SEESC tour leader



The Science Centre with a decorative lithic of uncertain age by the lake



The Torr Works Quarry, the largest quarry in the Mendips

The Science Centre lies in a natural setting by a lake and immediately adjacent to Moons Hill quarry which extracts volcanically-produced igneous rock from a ridge of hills termed the Beacon Hill Pericline. This rock, which was formed in the geological Silurian period around 425m years ago, is called andesite, or basalt. It's mostly used for road surfaces. Volcanoes in the Mendips??? An answer was given by David Rowley at the Mendip Rocks Festival Finale held in Wells Museum on 28th October. He demonstrated and described the development of the Mendips from Silurian times when they were in tropical latitudes to what we see today in Somerset. He told us about earthquakes and the formation of the complicated geology of the Mendips through a series of slides and demonstrations involving Heath Robinson kit and slinkies. All designed for school children (David works at the Cathedral school), but entertaining and revealing for his audience in Wells. The mountain building episode which created the Mendips is called the Hercynian Orogeny, brought about by the collision of Gondwanaland and Laurentia around 290m years ago. Volcanoes were part of the episode as were profound shifts vertically and horizontally of the rocks which form the Mendips. The melting of the great ice sheet which covered much of the British Isles in the Ice Age contributes to the continuing quakes in the UK as the geology continues to adjust. Did you know:

- On average, it is thought that an earthquake hits the British Isles every four days (see http://www.earthquakes.bgs.ac.uk/earthquakes/recent_uk_events.html)
- The largest known British earthquake occurred near the Dogger Bank in 1931, with a magnitude of 6.1. It was 60 miles off shore, but was still powerful enough to cause minor damage to buildings on the east coast.
- The most damaging UK earthquake was in the Colchester area in 1884. Some 1200 buildings needed repairs, chimneys collapsed and walls were cracked.
- In 1248, an earthquake caused damage to Wells Cathedral and in 1275 a quake damaged St Michael's tower on Glastonbury Tor.

Fascinating facts and great presentations. The last of the presenters was Danielle Shreve from Royal Holloway who gave an update on her excavation in Ebbor Gorge. The focus of her research is on the fossil mammal record from the last 2.6 million years (the Quaternary), combining elements of biostratigraphy (the use of fossil assemblages as a dating tool) and the reconstruction of past environments, with the investigation of palaeobiological aspects such as evolutionary change and the interaction of past mammalian communities with early humans. She has worked on Gully Cave since 2006 and described the assemblage of animal bones from the cave, found through careful sieving of all the soils. The finds consist of animal bones, beautifully preserved because of the lime-rich conditions of the soil. Mostly these are small: molluscs, invertebrates and many small mammals such as voles, shrews, lemmings, foxes and stoats. They have also included larger mammals such as deer and reindeer as well as the leg of an auroch, providing a range of radiocarbon dates from 10,000-14,500 years ago. The changing types of mammals reflect the fluctuations in temperature during the Holocene. As she reported in 2013:

Since 2006, excavations at the previously unexplored Gully Cave have exposed the upper part of the cave fill and revealed a red, limestone-rich breccia, capped by a densely cemented carbonate flowstone. The breccia has proved to be spectacularly rich in the remains of Late Pleistocene fauna, with 23 mammalian taxa, at least 7 bird taxa and 19 molluscan taxa, making it one of the richest terminal Pleistocene sites in Britain, if not the richest. (2nd workshop of AOHB3 on Dispersal of Early Humans).



The project has now found charcoal and a patinated flint, the first sign of human occupation in the cave. The flint was probably from the Frome area and may be 40,000 to 50,000 years old! She is hoping for more evidence of occupation as they explore further down below the cave next year.

Left: entrance to Gully Cave

Mary Claridge