

Some three miles south of Inchnadamph stands a crag of limestone containing three caves — the Bone Cave, the Reindeer Cave and one un-named.

The Bone Cave was excavated in 1889 by Peach and Horne of the Geological Survey. Further excavations of the two remaining caves were carried out in 1926 by Cree and Callander. The following year the Bone Cave was re-excavated to reassess published evidence.

A recent account* brings to light again published material as well as unpublished letters and manuscripts that have been kept in the Royal Scottish Museum.

The excavations of the westernmost (un-named) cave demonstrated that it consisted of two chambers leading to a series of crawl passages at the back. A connection with the adjacent Reindeer Cave was later proved by a smoke test.

The uppermost surface deposit, a "cave earth" contained pieces of charcoal, a portion of an iron knife and a finely made knife handle carved from a piece of red deer antler. Excavation of an inner

Early Traces of Man in Inchnadamph Caves

by Donald Omand

chamber brought to light a human femur (thigh bone) which was believed to have been brought into the cave by animals.

The Reindeer Cave, which also has two chambers, proved to be of much greater archaeological interest. Excavation within some silt (fine-grained material) in the inner cave led to the discovery of the jaw of a cave bear, the remains of an Arctic fox and a Northern lynx.

During the following season (1927) a near complete skull of a bear, bones of young bears, young wolves, young reindeer and the remains of small Arctic rodents were discovered.

Other finds of interest from the outer part of Reindeer Cave were:

- (1) a bone awl which appeared to have been much used as the point had broken off the edges were rounded and smoothed with wear.
- (2) the head of a bone pin was found separated from the lower part of the pin which was found accompanying a ceremonially buried human skull.
- (3) a second burial was uncovered in a narrow fissure at the back of the cave, where a number of human bones seem to have been unceremoniously bundled into the recess. They included a short-headed skull unlike the the long-headed one found earlier.
- (4) a javelin or spear point was found in association with the bear bones mentioned above. It

was made from a piece of reindeer antler and had a groove running from the blunt end towards the point.

(5) a number of limpet and mussel shells found in the cave earth would most likely have been introduced by man.

The Bone Cave deposits were then investigated by Cree and Callander to see if they would tie in with the various gravel, sand and "cave earth" sediments of the other caves. They worked their way through sections untouched by Peach and Horne and revealed the following sequence:

- (a) at the base of the deposits a dark grey clay was found
- (b) a thick layer of variegated-coloured clay overlaid the grey sediments
- (c) above this was a gravel
- (d) overlying the gravel was a "cave earth".

Apparently few details of animal remains were recorded and so the following known list must be considered as minimal: bears' teeth, reindeer antler, fox teeth and fish bones. Cree and Callander believed that the fish bones indicated the presence of man in the cave, but they could, perhaps be attributed to fish-eating animals such as bear.

A further possible indicator of human presence was the pieces of

charcoal scattered in the upper levels of the deposits.

Regrettably, no final report on the age of the deposits was written by the excavators, who must surely have considered the site to be of archaeological and zoological importance.

It is quite clear from their notes (and those of the geologists before them) that they believed the deposits in the caves were laid down in glacial time when ice still lay thickly in the area. Only the "cave earth" was considered to have been deposited after the disappearance of the ice.

Since excavation of the caves, many writers have shown an interest in the finds, but owing to a lack of detail of published reports by the excavators, the significance of the work in the caves has become confused.

Some of the animal finds at least do not necessarily indicate great antiquity. For example, brown bear bones from a cave farther up the Allt nan Uamh valley gave a date of some 5000 years ago.

On the current state of archaeological evidence it would seem unlikely that man was present here in late glacial times (the Upper Palaeolithic). The nearest site of this period is in the Lake District.

Could early man have reached West Sutherland without leaving any trace of his existence elsewhere in Scotland?

* The 1926-27 excavations of the Creag nan Uamh bone caves near Inchnadamph, Sutherland — T J Lawson.

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