

NOTT CAVING by Duncan Price

It is amazing the lengths that people will go to in order to get underground during the Foot & Mouth crisis. Some CSS members have resorted to getting the British Government to pay for them to go caving abroad (see N/L 43/5). The same characters have also taken to going caving beneath the streets of Nottingham...

Not a lot of people know that Nottingham is riddled with caves - 27 under the city centre alone - developed in the sandstone cliffs upon which Robin Hood's city is built, north of the river Trent. They are all, however, man-made - the result of enterprising excavation to provide residents with cellars, stables etc. Some are still in use beneath the historic public houses of the city and are used to keep the foaming ale cool. Others have fallen into disuse, filled with rubbish and often forgotten until they become a hazard to redevelopment of the area.

A visit to some of the more accessible caves was arranged by Andy Farrant on May 9th, 2001. Our guide for the evening was none other than Dr. Tony Waltham, famous cave explorer, lecturer at Nottingham Trent University and author of the book "Sandstone Caves of Nottingham" published by the East Midlands Geological Society 1996 (ISBN 0-9519717-1-9, price £3.95). A group of us

(British Geological Survey employees, climbers, cavers and assorted hangers-on) assembled outside the Broadmarsh Shopping Centre to await Tony's arrival, briefcase in hand, fresh from work. Issuing us with a survey, we set off through the empty shopping centre to the entrance to the caves beneath.

The Drury Hill Caves were originally in the cliff face above the flood plain of the River Trent and would have been totally destroyed during the construction of the shopping centre in the 1960's. Instead, their historic value was recognised and the design of the centre was changed to conserve them, whereupon they were subsequently developed as a tourist attraction which opened to the general public in 1994. The show caves have been tastefully filled with props which illustrate their uses from a tannery, Victorian slum and beer cellar. Many of the caves in the city were pressed into use as a wartime air raid shelter. Some of the caves retain their original roofs - the sandstone is quite strong when dry but is prone to failure when exposed to moisture (usually from leaking drains). In other places the concrete base of the shopping mall above was visible overhead and a substantial reinforced beam was placed above the caves so as not to overload their thin and weak roofs.

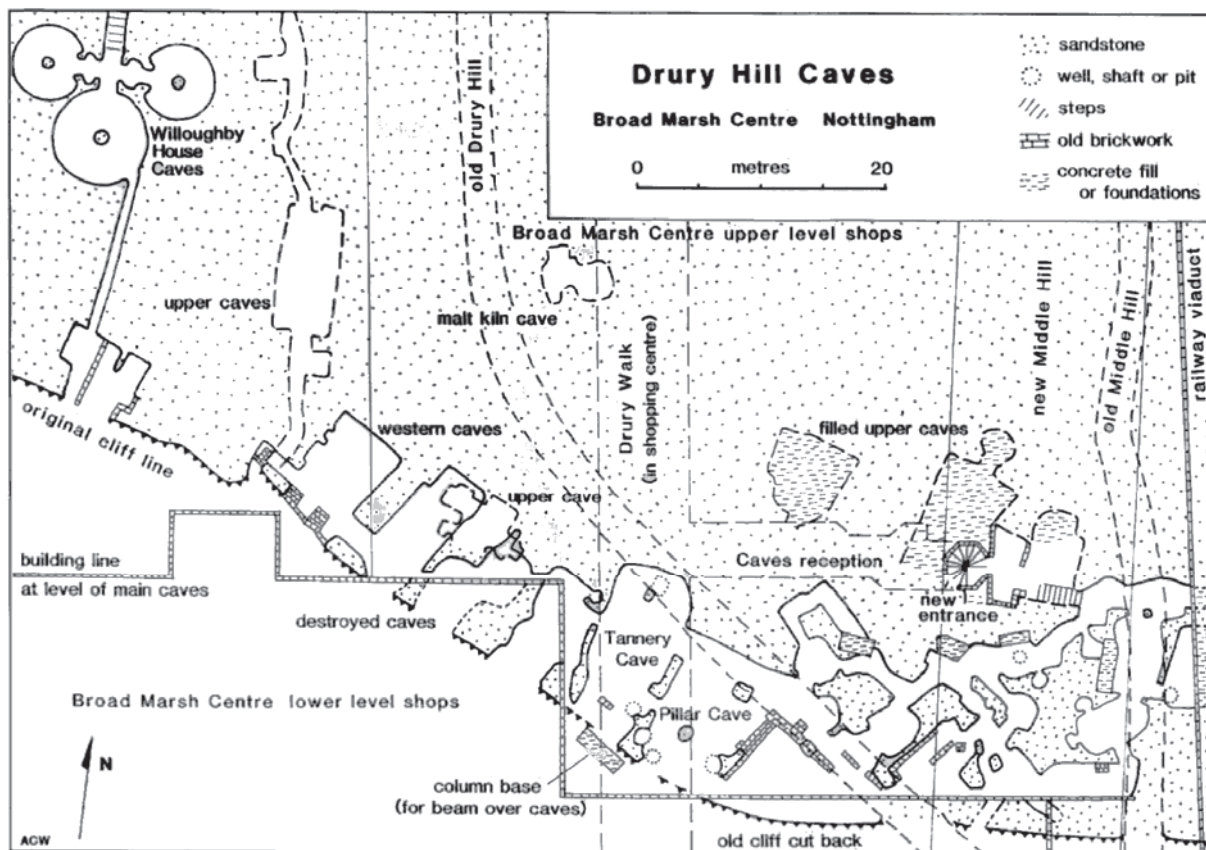


Figure 1: Plan of the main group of caves cut into the sandstone cliff where the old Drury hill climbed from the flood plain into the old town. Most of the caves are now preserved beneath the Broad Marsh Shopping Centre, and these include the tourist caves known as The Caves of Nottingham.

Collapse of unknown caves is quite a problem in Nottingham and it is part of Tony's job to check them out. Where the rock above is thick enough then there is usually no problem as long as the cave is dry. Test bores are normally made beneath any new structures but there are occasionally surprises when an unknown cave collapses. Probably, there are caves below all buildings in central Nottingham where they were dug open to provide a lower floor. Some of the caves were also made for the purpose of extracting sand. We did not visit these mines on this trip but were allowed to step outside (literally) the show caves and see some of the nearby caves which are under development as potential extensions to the tourist attraction.

Possibly the most interesting of these was the Willoughby House Caves which consist of three roomy circular chambers with central pillars. Tony told us how one of his students came across some gold coins hidden in an alcove while they were doing some work there. The treasure had probably been hidden by a thief in the past and never recovered.

Whilst we were there, the Wednesday night diggers were also in action. This is a local archeological

group which is working to excavate the caves and keep a record of any thing that they dig up. We were shown a large collection of clay pipes which they had come across. Apparently they also excavate some local wells but their resident diver had reached sixty and had retired. I left them my business card just in case my services were needed!

Tony gave us an excellent and humorous tour of the site. There are several more caves in Nottingham that it may be possible to visit in the future. The caves we visited were very dry, so our more immediate need, however, was for rehydration. Retaining the speleological theme to the evening, we retired to the Salutation Inn - which is also above some caves which you can visit.

Footnote: The surveys included with this article are taken from A.C.Waltham, "Sandstone Caves of Nottingham" East Midlands Geological Society, Nottingham (1996) and reproduced with the author's permission. Information about the show caves is available on the web at <http://www.aboutbritain.com/CavesOfNottingham.htm>

Figure 2: Projected section through the Broad Marsh Shopping Centre showing the massive concrete foundation beam which spans the caves. The beam lies almost over the narrow rib of sandstone left between the Pillar and Tannery Caves; the caves directly beneath the beam do not extend as far north as the projected outline of the Tannery Cave.

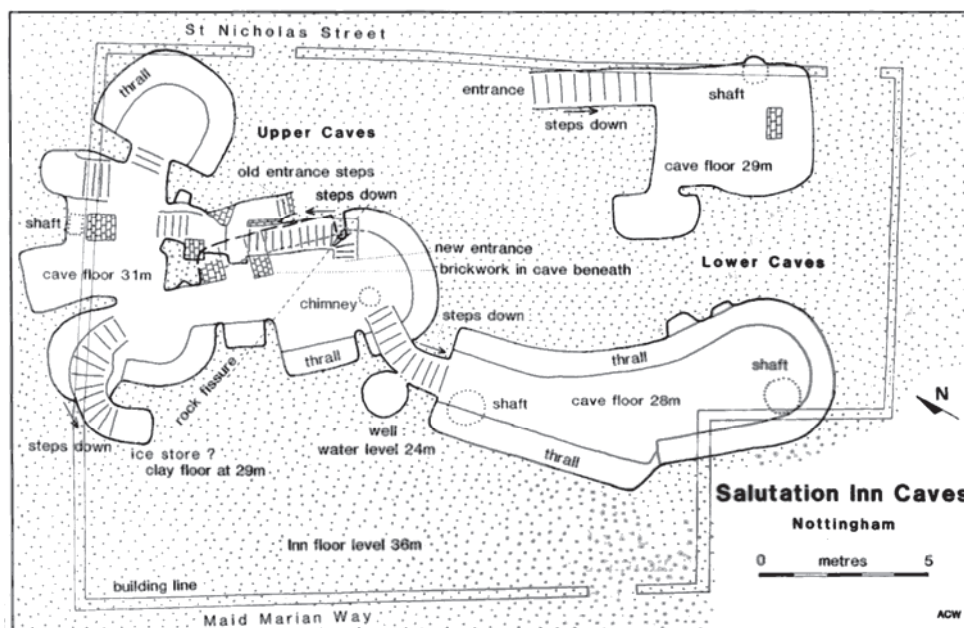
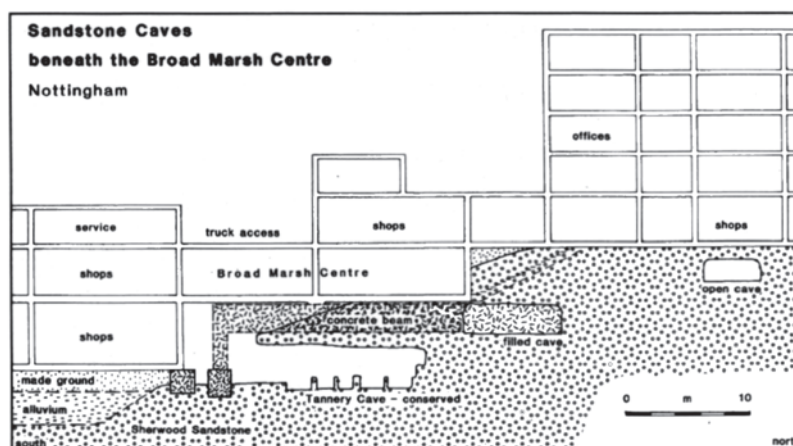


Figure 3: Plan of the caves under the Salutation Inn on Maid Marion Way. The different levels are indicated by the approximate floor altitudes. There is believed to be another cave, currently inaccessible, beneath the frontage on St Nicholas Street between the two mapped caves.