Beer Quarry Caves

The oldest continuously worked industrial site in Britain

Started by the Romans in 50 AD. Ceased full scale working only in 1920.

75 acres of striking and beautiful underground caverns some already open to the public

An unknown number of caves still to be excavated

This is the first full documentary ever made in these caves, which are the oldest continuously worked industrial site in Britain. Full scale working halted in 1920 but the caves were used to store naval explosives during the 2nd World War, and to grow food for Britain's threatened population. Despite the halting of large scale underground quarrying in the 1920's some work still goes on, with demand for the beautiful white limestone still coming in from all over the world.

Summary.

Beer Quarry Caves are an underground quarry, three quarters of a mile from the small fishing and holiday village of Beer on Devon's World Heritage Jurassic coast. The Roman's first began mining the unique limestone around about 50 AD. They used it to build villa's, temples and fortifications. To do so they cut into the side of a hill, whose upper surface bears traces of flint tools and artefacts made by Devon's earliest inhabitants, Neolithic people who lived on the coast around 3000 BC. There are two open entrances to the caves in the hill now, one Roman and the other Norman. There are also 18 covered and unexplored entrances into the hill. Roman tools, artefacts and coins have been found around the open Roman entrance. Many tools from other ages of British industrial history have been found at Beer Quarry Caves.

There is a symbiotic connection between the caves and the village. The quarry men who worked, or slaved, in Beer Quarry Caves have always came from the small coastal settlement. There are written records which take us back to the 10th and 11th century, when the limestone was being used in Saxon churches and palaces. Following the Norman conquest in 1066, the caves came into huge demand, with the stone from the Quarry being used in at least 24 of the 44 great Cathedrals of the Norman period. By the 1300's the stone was being shipped around the coast to London, where it was used in the Tower of London, Hampton Court and the old Palace of Westminster. Between the parish records in Beer and the Cathedral of Exeter, whose Bishop leased the Quarry for centuries, there are detailed written

accounts of the money paid and the work done by the workers at the Quarry.

The caverns resemble the great buildings created from the stone that was quarried there. Quite literally, they are like underground cathedrals. The cavern roofs are supported by pillars which lend an extraordinary and dramatic aspect to the huge empty spaces below the hill. But there was a price to pay for what became the exquisite beauty of the great cathedrals, churches, palaces and stately homes of England. And it was paid by the quarrymen of Beer village.

The documentary closes with the English words of a French poem of unknown authorship.

"Master mason, you built your cathedral towards heaven
With stone that was quarried from hell."

For this is the literal truth of how that stone was gouged out of the earth at Beer. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the quarrymen, working by the light of tallow (animal fat) candles, 5 of which they had to buy from the owner each morning, worked in an unchanging atmosphere of 53 Farenheit, suffused in a dense and stinking cloud of smoke coming from the candles. To stop work that went on for 15 hours a day, 6 days a week, meant to chill to the marrow. To get paid meant being able to show a 4 ton block of limestone to the tapper, the man who tested the block at the end of each day. If the rock rang untrue the quarryman went home unpaid, and his family went hungry. Around the quarry a significant but now vanished industry developed. Over 400 horses lived in the fields around the caves. Dozens of farriers kept the horses shod and a huge collection of carpenters built and renovated the great carts that took the stone around the country. In 1758 a piece of the quarry roof, which can still be seen, collapsed following an explosion on the surface and 48 men and one boy were killed. When told of this the Quarry owners only reply the following morning was to ask "Have we lost any horses ? ". Human life was cheap in the caves and few quarrymen lived beyond their thirties, having started work in the caverns at the age of 8 or 9.

There was another occupation, that of stonemason, which also thrived at the quarry. Bound by traditional stone masons oaths of secrecy no quarry man until William Cawley in 1856, the grandson of a quarry man killed in a smuggling accident in 1801, ever became a stone mason. Cawley's name is carved on one of the great pillars supporting the roof.

The other occupation of the inhabitants of Beer when times were bad, and they often were in times gone by, was smuggling. Liquor from the continent; brandy from France and port from Portugal and Spain was often hidden in the caves, where customs men almost never found it. But when they did, fights followed. In one fight two customs officers were killed.

It is appropriate that the story of Beer Quarry Caves is told by a descendant of one of those two men, John Scott, himself a contemporary resident of Beer.

It is also appropriate for another reason. Twenty five years ago a man got lost in the cavern complex. It took 37 volunteers 16 hours to find the man. The leasees of the Quarry thought that they could not afford the risk of this happening again and decided

to blow up the Quarry entrances, shutting them off for ever. That would have meant 2,000 years of British history vanishing, for ever. John Scott, who had known the caves since he was a child, asked the freeholder, a local landowner called Lord Clinton, if he could have a go at keeping the caves open. Lord Clinton readily agreed, granted John a lease, and after 4 Winters on the dole John Scott got the caves open so that the public could once again see how Britain was built – you will notice that David Dimbly, in his documentary of how Britain was build, never quite got to where the stone came from, or how it came from where it came from.

In the Winter some of Britain's rarest bats hibernate there. It is John Scott's task to check on the bats and report to English Nature.

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