

## AN INVESTIGATION OF ROYSTON CAVE

Sylvia P. Beamon and Lisa G. Donel

### *HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF ROYSTON CAVE*

Sylvia P. Beamon

Royston Cave is situated thirteen miles (20 km.) from Cambridge, in the County of Hertfordshire and adjacent to where the two Roman roads, known today as the Icknield Way and Ermine Street, cross in the town. The Cave, which is man-made and hollowed out of Middle outcrop chalk, lies beneath; access to it is through the 'new' passageway cut in 1790 on the East side of Melbourn Street.

#### *Summary*

Royston Cave is unique in Europe in design and decoration but shares similarities with some in Israel. There have been many theories put forward as to its origin which the writer has followed up and analysed to the best of her ability. Suggestions have been: Lady Roisia's oratory (Stukeley), hermitage (Parkin), Roman Columbarium and hermitage (Beldam), dene-hole, flint mine, marlpit, refuge, granary pit. Most of the latter types of structure are entered from the top downwards, whereas entry to the cave was by the North entrance; therefore the dome must have been deliberately cut upwards, then tiled. The main consensus of opinion is that the engravings were cut around the thirteenth century, but the actual period in which the Cave itself was constructed is open to speculation.

There is evidence that the Templars were in Royston every week and this market town is only four miles away from Wendy, eight miles from Duxford where they had preceptories, also nine miles from Baldock. They had their respective churches at Baldock, Wendy and Whittlesford (Duxford) but when not on active duty they were obliged to make their devotions regularly throughout the day and this would not have been possible in Royston. A Templar chapel probably became a necessity and from a practical point of view, a warehouse for market goods would have been an asset too. At sometime the Royston Cave was two storeyed. (See Excavation Report).

From the shape of the Cave with octagonal step, tiling in the dome, a frieze above the carvings, which are Medieval in style and include St. Katherine, St. Laurence and St. Christopher, all revered by the crusaders, the altar on the West, and cult symbols showing similarities with the Chinon graffiti, the writer puts forward the hypothesis that this was a deliberate copy of the Holy Sepulchre. There have been other examples,

for instance in Spain at the church of La Vera Cruz, Segovia, where within the central row of pillars is a model of the Sepulchre, a two storeyed building with steps going up to it, as also in the church of San Stefano at Bologna.<sup>1</sup>

The writer feels that further investigation is needed both historically and scientifically, to give a better understanding of Royston Cave.

### *History*

The Cave was discovered by accident in August, 1742, when a bench was being erected in the Mercat House for the women who sold their wares in the cheese and butter market held there. Those digging a hole for a necessary post, struck through the eye or central hole of a millstone, laid underground, and found a cavity which, as a plumb line showed, was approximately 16 ft. (4.80 m.) deep. They took up the millstone, and saw a well-like descent of about 2 ft. (0.60 m.) diameter with holes cut in the chalk, at equal distances and opposite to each other like the steps of a ladder for descent. This shaft (to be called the North shaft), we are informed, was quite circular and perpendicular. A boy was first let down into it, and afterwards a thin man, with a lighted candle, who ascertained that it passed through an opening about 4 ft. (1.20 m.) in height into another cavity which was filled with loose earth but not touching the wall.

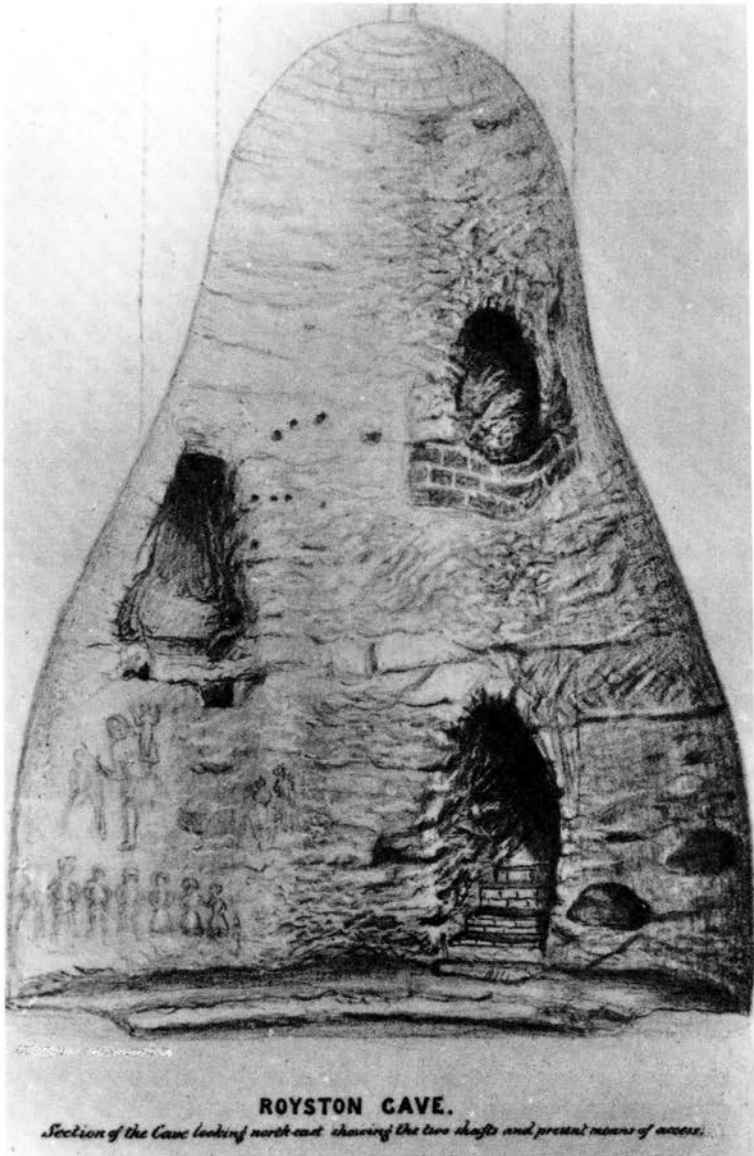
The descent was enlarged and 200 loads of earth and rubbish were removed by buckets and a well-kirb. It was then seen to be a bell or mitral-shaped chamber hewn out of natural chalk.<sup>2</sup> (Pl 1).

The only finds from the Cave reported by the Rev. G. North were a human skull, a few decayed bones, fragments of a small drinking cup of "common brown earth, marked with yellow spots", and a piece of brass without any figure or inscription on it. Shortly afterwards a small seal marked with a single fleur-de-lis came into the possession of Stukeley, one of the first visitors and writers on the Cave. He describes it as "made of white earthlike chalk or pipe-makers clay, baked."<sup>3</sup>

In different parts of the Cave, both above and below a cornice, deep cavities or recesses of various forms and sizes, some of them oblong and others oven-shaped, are irregularly cut into the wall.

The Rev. G. North, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, who made his observations before the cave was emptied, and therefore from a higher level, noticed that a portion of the dome had been either repaired or strengthened with free-stone and tiles, placed edgewise; and that almost opposite the shaft through which he entered, there appeared the top of an arch, which the workmen imagined might lead to the ancient way into it, but concluded from the narrowness of this shaft (Eastern) that it was designed only for a vent or air-hole. He also remarked, that the top or crown-work of the dome was curiously composed of tile work, and within a foot of the street above<sup>4</sup>.

The height of the Cave from the floor to the top of the dome, is about 25½ ft. (7.75 m.), the length of the aperture leading up to the surface about 2 ft. (0.60 m.) making, together with the thickness of the crown-work, which is now pierced to the pavement



**ROYSTON CAVE.**

*Section of the Cave looking north-east, showing the two shafts and present means of access.*

Pl. I Section through the Cave looking north-east, showing the two shafts and the present means of access.

*Photograph by Robert H. Clark, circa 1900.*

above and covered by a grid, approximately 29 ft. (8.83 m.). The bottom is not quite circular; the diameter from North to South is about 17 ft. (5.18 m.) and from East to West about 17ft. 6 ins. (5.33 m.), the difference being caused by the groove of the Eastern shaft, which has not been accurately worked into the circle.

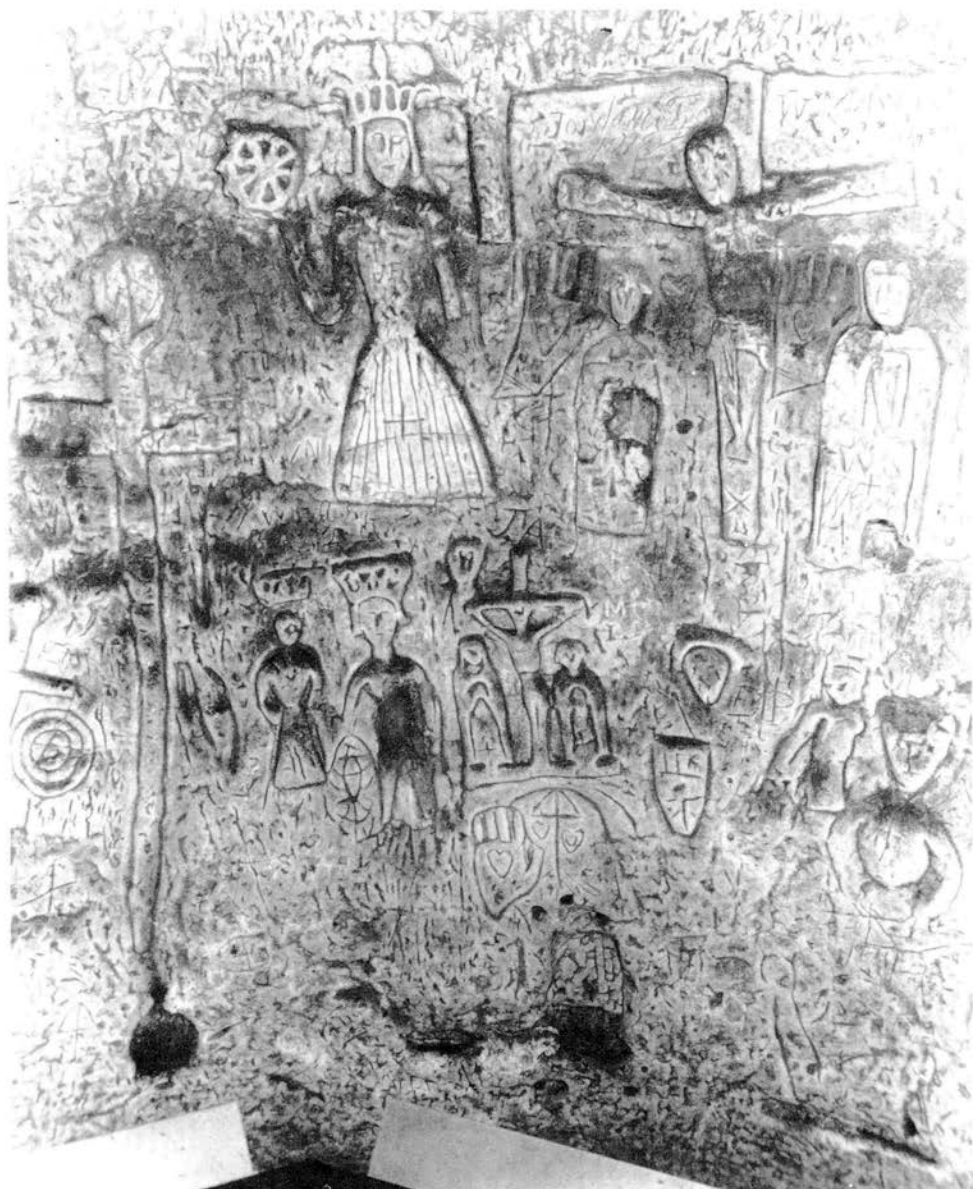
An octagonal broad step or podium surrounds the floor and is approximately 8 ins. (20 cm.) in height by 3 ft. (0.90 m.) in width, except over the area which Stukeley called the 'grave'. The writer believes this depression, claimed to have been originally about 7 ft. 6 ins. (2.40 m.) long by 3 ft. (0.90 m.) wide and 2 ft. 3 ins. (0.68 m.) deep, was used as a sump for water because under ultra-violet light it is evidenced that water seeps naturally down this wall and the surface is worn. This suggestion is considered to be a likely explanation and verified in the Geological Report from the Department of Geology, Cambridge. Immediately above the 'grave' at the height of about 17 ft. (5.18 m.) appears the masonry supposed by Stukeley and North to have concealed the original entrance. Three lower courses only of this masonry now remain, formed of blocks of chalk neatly chiselled, and coloured red, giving them the appearance of brickwork. The shaft had been partially filled with earth, which on examination was found to be mixed with small fragments of the bones of animals and a few pieces of medieval pottery, but no human bones<sup>5</sup>.

Approximately 8 ft. (2.40 m.) from the floor the cornice or frieze runs round the walls, cut in a reticulated pattern, approaching 2 ft. (0.60 m.) in breadth, and receding as it rises about 6 ins. (15 cm.) making the diameter of the lower part of the dome, which extends from it, about 18 ft. (5.50 m.). The cornice is not, however, continued over the 'grave', but descends with a curve on one side, leaving the space above it unornamented and in its original condition.

Almost the whole circle between the podium and the cornice has been sculptured in low relief, illustrating St. Christopher, St. Katherine, St. Laurence and Crucifixion scenes, together with unusual signs and symbols (Pl. 2). Many of the sculptures, if not all, have been coloured. Traces of red, blue and yellow were still visible in various places in 1852, and the relief of the figures had been assisted by a darker pigment, as mentioned by Joseph Beldam in his book *The Royston Cave*. In 1974 Dr. H. K. Cameron of Cambridge University took scrapings of the supposed painted areas, but information has proved inconclusive except to show that trace elements present could be contained in pigmentation; after subsequent reference to Mr. Ashok Roy of the Scientific Department of the National Gallery, this possibility has been confirmed.

Above the cornice appear faces, crude heraldic devices and indecipherable graffiti incised into the chalk, but none in relief.

Mainly because the walls of the Cave were found to be covered with carvings, interest was particularly aroused and it became the subject of published works by three antiquaries. Between 1743 — 46 Dr. William Stukeley wrote two books. He formed the opinion that the Cave was an oratory which was engraved in person by Lady Roisia De Vere, wife of Geoffrey de Mandeville, first Earl of Essex, depicting her family history<sup>6</sup>. The Rev. Charles Parkin wrote two books in answer to Stukeley's and concluded it was a hermit's cell and oratory; because there was a Cross at Royston, he also maintained



Pl. 2 Royston Cave, showing the branched cross or altar, with small alveolus beneath for a light to illuminate the area; St. Katharine with the wheel; the Crucifixion scenes; cult symbols, etc.

*Photograph by courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art.*

that a hundred court had been held there since King Alfred the Great<sup>7</sup>. There is no evidence of the latter theory and Royston is presumed to be post 1086, as it is not mentioned in Domesday Book.

Joseph Beldam was the third writer; his conclusions were:-

- 1) The Cave was first formed by means of shafts, either of British or Romano-British construction and at a period anterior to Christianity.
- 2) At a somewhat later period it was used as a Roman sepulchre.
- 3) It received the greater part of its present decoration at about the crusading period and was then, if not before, converted into a Christian oratory to which a hermitage was probably attached.
- 4) It remained open until the Reformation when it was finally filled up, closed and forgotten.<sup>8</sup>

The present writer has put forward the suggestion that the Cave has at sometime had a connection with the Knights Templar. The Templars were both a military and a religious order, set up in 1118 to protect pilgrims going to the Holy Land. They fought in the Crusading wars and became very powerful both politically and socially. Eventually heretical charges were brought against them in Europe, including this country, after which most of their land passed to the Knights Hospitaller at the instigation of the Church. In 1312 the Order was dissolved throughout Christendom.

Amongst the reasons which have led the writer to this conclusion is the fact that some of the patterns cut into the walls (the axehead, hands, hearts, circular designs) also appear on certain walls of the Tour du Coudray in the Castle of Chinon, France,<sup>9</sup> known to have been used as a prison when many Templars were confined there prior to their execution, in the early years of the 14th century.

The Templars were strongly established in the neighbourhood of Royston and had many connections with leading local families; so it was clearly possible for them to have been concerned with the Cave. There were Templar houses at Baldock and Cambridge, with preceptories at Hitchin, Duxford and Shingay-cum-Wendy; all these places are only a few miles away from Royston and are close to the old N.-S. and E.-W. roads which cross in the town.

We have evidence that the Templars were regularly in Royston to attend the market, and were firmly entrenched in the district during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. We find the Prior of Royston had been involved in disputes with the Abbot of Westminster and the Master of the Knights Templar, who claimed exemption from toll in all English Markets. The dispute with the Templars, who it is noted owned property in Royston attached to Shingay preceptory, began in 1199 and was still continuing in 1200. It recurred in 1247-48. These pleas concerned 'liberties', probably the exemption from toll claimed by both parties.<sup>10</sup>

In 1254 the Master of the Templars sued the prior of Royston for imprisoning and beating certain of his men who had come to the market on the Templars' business; markets and fairs were frequently disturbed during the 13th and 14th centuries.<sup>11</sup> We also have the following reference:

"September, 1234: Prohibition of a tournament to be held at Royston on Thursday before Michaelmas next in the form whereby the tournaments of Northampton and Cambridge were prohibited before.

Mandate to the Prior of Royston to go with Jn. the Templar to the said place and prohibit the tournament and show these letters."<sup>12</sup>

From another source we know Peter de Roucestria, who inherited Newsells, the local Manor house, became a Templar shortly before his death in 1255 and donated 100 acres of land at Rivenhall to the Templars. The properties of Newsells and Rivenhall in Essex were conjoined.<sup>13</sup>

### *Resistivity Survey*

As there had never been a scientific study made of the Cave, on June 24th, 1972, with permission of Royston U.D.C., a Resistivity Test was carried out by Mr. H. A. Allerton and Mr. D. I. Sewart, from the Department of Geodesy and Geophysics in Cambridge.

The purpose of the Resistivity Survey was to indicate by remote sensing techniques whether or not there were any inhomogeneities within the floor of the Cave. The results of this survey showed anomalous resistivity areas, some of which were directly related to known features, e.g. the octagonal step and the 'grave' near the 'new' entrance. The remaining anomalous zones could not be explained by surface features, and were therefore of considerable interest. These were marked as high priority areas on the survey map.

On May 30th 1973, again with permission from the U.D.C. and the Department of Environment, as it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, a small test was carried out on the floor of the Cave by Dr. C. Forbes from the Cambridge Department of Geology and an archaeologist, Miss S. Ames. Two areas of moderately high resistivity were investigated by striking with a small mattock. In each case, solid undisturbed white chalk was found an inch or two below the floor. Excavation was minimal owing to the chance of there being depressions containing archaeological material demanding deliberate excavation. However, the sizes of the 'lows' and their relationship to the proved solid chalk indicated that such depressions would not be more than a foot or two deep. It was thought that perhaps some resistivity features were not indications of depressions, but only of local fissures emphasised by, for instance, salt derived from seepage of road run-off. A small excavation at the foot of the peripheral step, directly opposite the usual entrance to the Cave, demonstrated that the solid chalk of the step is continuous with solid chalk close below floor surface.

Permission was, therefore obtained from the Department of the Environment and the Urban District Council for a partial archaeological investigation of the Cave Floor.

*EXCAVATION REPORT* - Lisa G. Donel

Excavation was undertaken at Royston Cave for five days at the end of March 1976. It was hoped that various questions might be answered archaeologically. These were:

- 1) whether any features existed below the layer of compacted dirt or whether the floor was undisturbed
- 2) whether any dating material existed
- 3) to determine the nature of the podium/step around the main part of the cave floor.

Several anomalies had been identified by a resistivity study, and so it was determined to excavate two diagonally opposed quadrants of the area in order to identify as many features as possible and to accommodate a very cramped excavation. Due to restrictions we were unable to examine the podium area.

The area to be excavated, the cave floor, was covered by a layer of compacted dirt and rubbish that had formed over time, by being washed in through the modern entrance and a street grid approximately 29 ft. above. This was removed and a layer of decayed chalk rubble and dust was exposed.

A large feature (P1.3a.) was exposed in Quadrant 1. This had been filled initially by a fine silt followed by chalk rubble. The feature itself extended into the two unexcavated quadrants but did not appear to extend into Quadrant 3. Its depth increased at the centre of the Cave (O), becoming quite shallow near the outer edge, at the juncture of the podium and floor (A,A'). 18th-century pottery was found near the surface in the chalk rubble fill. (Fig 1).

Because there are no records of the modern excavation of the 'grave' at the time of its being cleaned out in 1966, it is hard to discuss it with any real meaning. However, if it was really a sump then one must view the 'grave' as a successful cutting after the initial sump (F4) proved unsatisfactory. It has been noticed at times of flooding in the cave that the 'grave' acts as a highly successful container and method of drainage, whereas Feature 4 and the central area tend to retain water. This was further emphasized after the excavation when a return trip to the Cave showed the feature to be entirely incapable of draining, whereas the 'grave' was working quite well. The placement of Feature 4 is also questionable when one views it in association with the possible structure that may have stood in the cave. This, however, will be discussed later.

Three features were identified in Quadrant 3 (P1.3b). These were under a layer of chalk and chalk rubble but did not have the same fill as F4. In contrast, all three were filled with a reddish/brown soil, the largest feature also containing small chalk pieces. The smallest (F1) was a shallow bowl-shaped depression, showing a smoothing, apparently deliberate, that was echoed in the larger feature (F3). Feature 2, a hole of small diameter but some depth, included a cylindrical discolouration that was later identified as decayed wood. The third feature was a large deep hole, cut with precision into the chalk, showing a smoothed, flat bottom. Associated with the smoothed hole was a slightly deeper cutting that cut into the first but showed no flattening of the bottom, rather a very rough surface. This feature was filled with a layer of chalk rubble.



Pl. 3 Royston Cave: excavation, 1976.



a. Quadrant 1 showing 'sump' (F4).  
*Photograph, L. Donel*



b. Quadrant 3 showing Features 1, 2 and 3.  
*Photograph R. Tibbs*

It is possible that this second rougher feature was used as a hole for packing-support for F.3.

The discovery of two cardinal point tiles was also made, 'N' in Quadrant 3 and 'S' in Quadrant 1. These were shown by compass to be slightly inaccurate. There is no record of the placement of these tiles. A third tile 'W' was found to have been uncovered, unknown to the excavators, several weeks after the completion of the excavation and subsequent backfilling.

Finds ranged from modern nails and silver paper washed in by the periodic flooding of the cave, to clay pipe, pieces of brick and tile, and some small sherds of pottery. The physical size of the material as well as the small size of the sample have not been of great aid to the investigator. However, the pottery has been dated to the 18th century. As the material tended to lie below the modern compacted dirt and rubbish but did not appear in the lowest levels of the excavation, the material apparently found its way into the cave when it was discovered in the 18th century.

There was no dating material found to give a date for the initial use of the Cave. However, as the 18th-century material was found above the fill of the features in Quadrant 3 and in the upper layer of the fill in F4, the possibility that those features had already been filled and covered before the opening of the Cave in the 18th century must be considered. There was no evidence that the features in Quadrant 3 had been disturbed since they were originally filled in, whether on purpose or through natural causes. Possibly the only 'treasure hunting' done in the 18th and 19th centuries took place at the 'grave' area.

The evidence of the Features found in Quadrant 3 and the anomaly identified through resistivity and sounding tests in Quadrant 4, seem to suggest the existence in the past of some structure. On examination of the walls, one is struck by the level of the original shafts which terminate some 17 ft. above the Cave floor. Associated with this terminal point and running at the same level are a series of niches. The larger of these niches have been suggested as storage areas. The smaller appear to have been some sort of support for a floor. If the original users of the cave had been constantly using ladders both for getting down from the shafts as well as moving them around for use of the 'storage' niches then the writer feels that the chalk walls with their sculpture would have shown more damage. It seems much more appropriate that a structure existed to act as a halfway platform between the end of the shafts and the Cave below. Because of lighting difficulties, the writer would like to suggest that the structure was not a complete flooring over the cave space but possibly a walkway that ran only part of the way round the Cave. The presence of features in Quadrants 3 and 4 and the placing of the sump and the 'grave' well to either side of any supporting posts, and the apparent lack of any large features in Quadrant 2 tend to lend support to the idea of a partial structure or semi-circular walkway in the Cave. However, until the whole Cave floor is examined in conjunction with an investigation of the Cave walls, this can only remain as interesting conjecture.

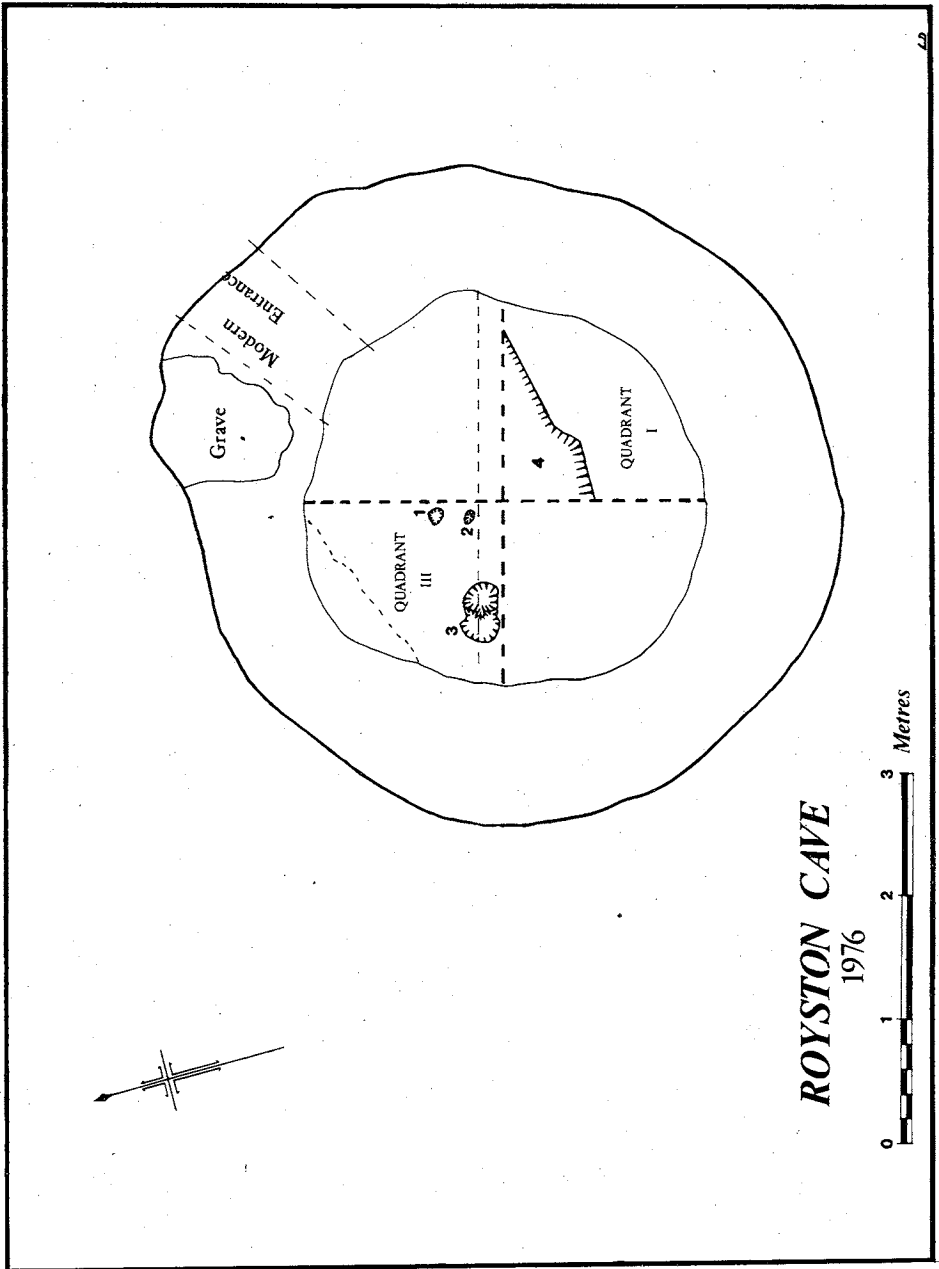


Fig. 1 Plan of the floor of Royston Cave.

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