Royston Cave… and the Templars?

Royston

A medieval 'new town', Royston is the smallest of the four towns of North Hertfordshire. It was first recorded in 1184 as *Crux Roys*, 'Roysia's Cross', and stands at the crossroads of Ermine Street (the original Great North Road) and Icknield Way. The northern half of the town lay in Cambridgeshire before 1897 and the southern in Hertfordshire. A chapel was founded between 1164 and 1169, which developed into an Augustinian Priory.

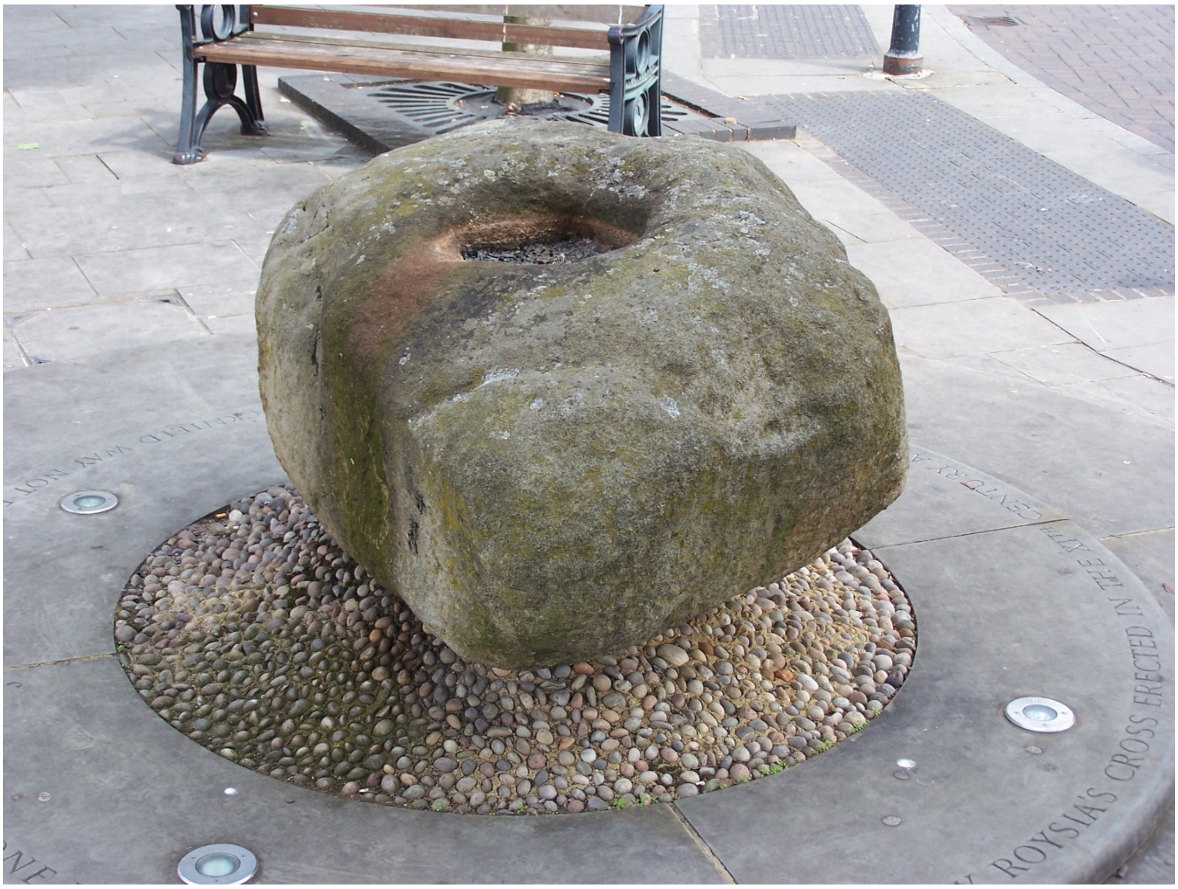


Figure 1: The Roys Stone, probably the base for a long-lost cross from which the town takes its name

The Priors set up markets and fairs to boost their income, and charters for fairs were granted in 1189 and 1252. The widened Ermine Street to make a broader market place and got permission to create a second market place, at Fish Hill, in the early thirteenth century. As well as a Priory, there were two hospitals, one dedicated to St Nicholas, in the Cambridgeshire part of the town, founded about 1200, and another to Ss John and James, established about 1224. There is a record of a hermit living in Barkway parish (in which part of Royston stood) in 1506 and Sir Robert Chester, who became lord of the manor of Royston in 1540, acquired it.

The most famous monument in Royston is a curious artificial cave, cut into the chalk bedrock, known as Royston Cave since its rediscovery in 1742. It has been mired in controversy since its rediscovery in August 1742 and with each new generation, a new controversy is generated. The current dispute is over its alleged links with the Knights Templar (more correctly, the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon), a medieval religious order suppressed in 1312 and currently a focus of one of the most widely believed conspiracy theories of our times: the "bloodline of Christ". Since the 1970s, local opinion has concurred that it was a shrine used by the Knights Templar. Virtually all the readily available information about the cave stresses this supposed Templar connection, but on examination, the evidence for it turns out to be very weak. In particular, various internet resources tend to copy each other and repeat the same stories. The first hit on Google takes the browser to a page stating that '*Royston Cave is an enigma. No records of its age or purpose exist. Some theories suggest the Knights Templar used it, others by King James I and the Freemasons*'. Much of what now passes for information about the place amounts to contemporary folklore, belief in which has become so entrenched that to question it can cause immense hostility.

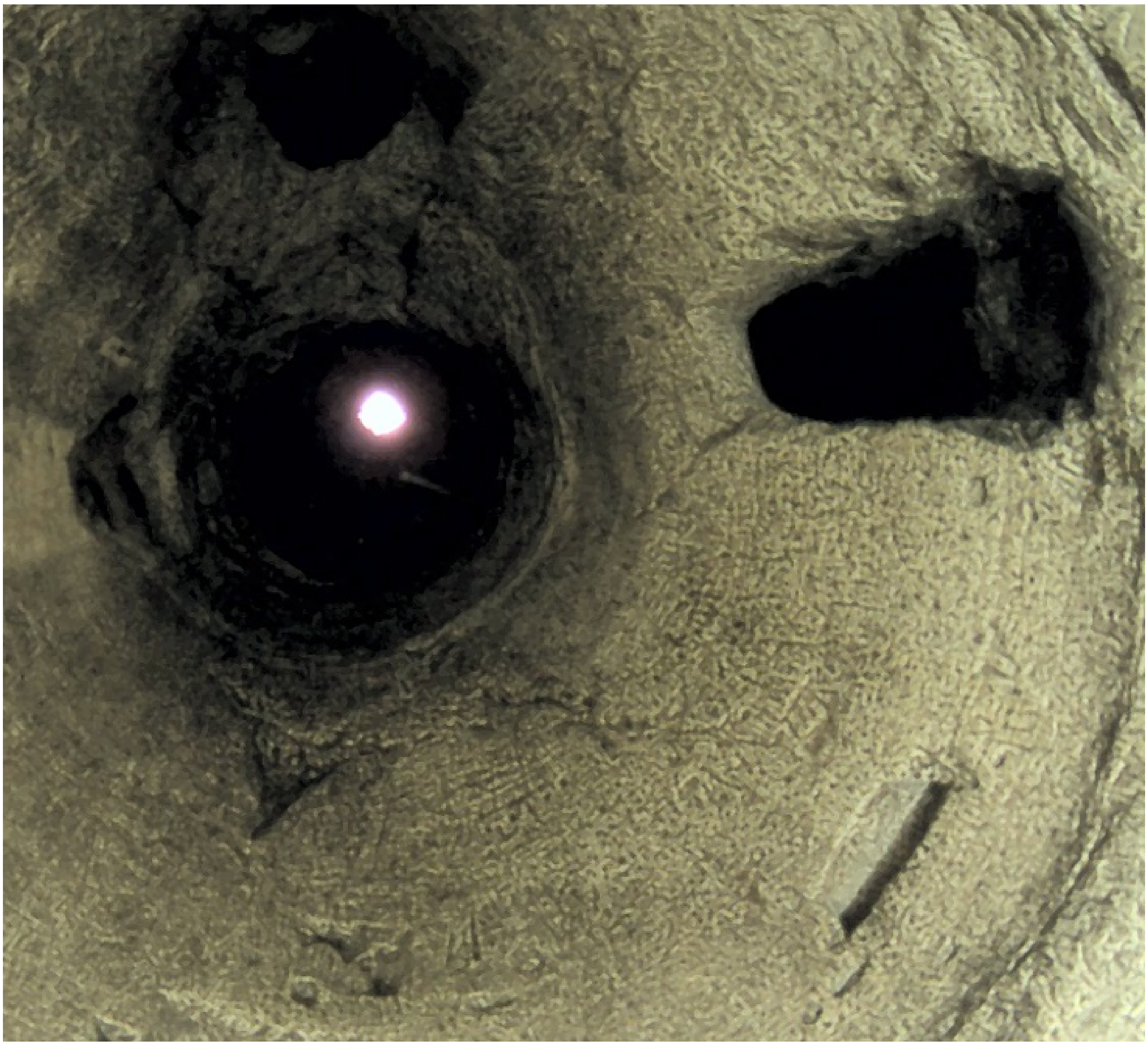


Figure 2: the inside of the cave, looking up; the entrance shaft first discovered is to the right

Yes, the cave is a mystery, but many mysteries are capable of solution and, as this is a site with numerous carvings on its walls, it is one that might be solved by applying techniques of stylistic analysis. The evidence for the assertion that it was created and used by the Knights Templar is inconclusive. Alternative explanations are possible for its origins and the origins of the carvings (which need not necessarily be connected). Explaining a site that appears to be unique requires judicious use of Occam's Razor and awareness of how easy it can be to jump to unwarranted conclusions.

Discovery

Royston Cave was rediscovered in August 1742, during the construction of a bench in the town's Merkat House, where the butter and cheese market was held. It stood in Melbourn Street, apparently in the centre of the road. The workmen digging a posthole for the bench uncovered a millstone and lifted it so that they could dig deeper. They revealed a hole and, using a plumb-line, found that it was 16′ (4.9 m) deep. They lowered a small boy down on the end of a rope: there was no thought of Health and Safety in those days. He reported that there was a cavern with an earthen floor at the bottom. A thin man was sent down next, who confirmed what the boy had said.

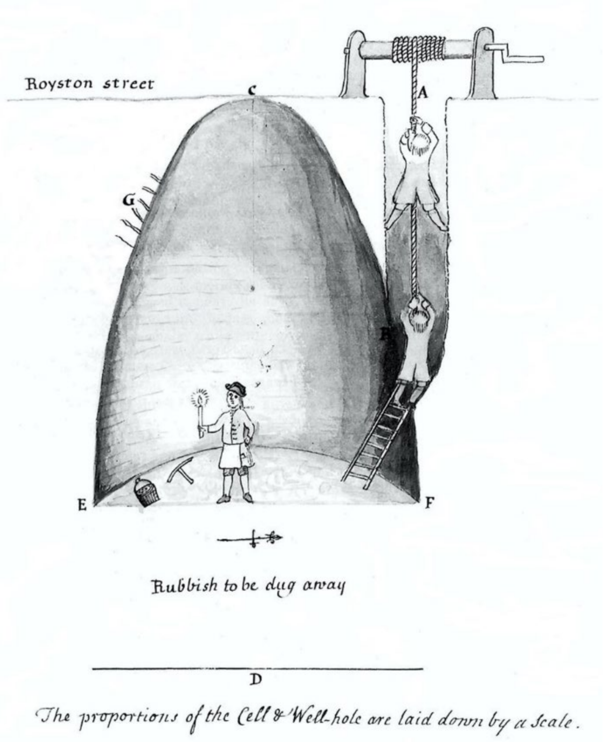

Royston street
C
A
G
B
E
F
Rubbish to be dug away
D
The proportions of the Cell & Well-hole are laid down by a Scale.

Figure 3: a contemporary drawing showing the cave as first discovered (after Beamon Royston Cave: Used by Saints or Sinners?)

George Lettis (the bailiff of the manor) and William Lilley (a tailor and shopkeeper), who lived close to the place, encouraged further exploration, hoping to discover buried treasure. They had the workmen widen the entrance shaft and set up a block-and-tackle above it to take out soil using buckets, although Ames's contemporary drawing suggests they used a windlass (Figure 3). They worked by night, owing to the crowds of people who were hindering their efforts by day. They removed 8′ (2.4 m) of soil, which was described as 200 'loads'. The volume can be calculated as about 50 m^3, which would have weighed about 72 tonnes. Each 'load' must have been a barrow-load or cartload of 7 cwt (0.36 tonnes) each.

Had the site been rediscovered in recent years, it would have been the subject of careful excavation, one hopes. As it was rediscovered in 1742, though, the fill was simply shovelled away. Reverend George North (1706-1772), later Vicar of Codicote 1743-1772 and an antiquary with a specialist interest in numismatics, visited soon after the discovery. He reported that it contained a human skull, some other bones (it is not clear if they were human or animal), fragments of a small brown earthenware cup decorated with yellow dots and a piece of copper alloy plate. None of the material seems to have been kept, as no-one at the time understood that it could yield useful information. However, some similar objects were found in a twentieth-century excavation of the 'grave' in the Cave floor. On the contrary, the main aim of those who emptied the cave was to find treasure, perhaps concealed in hidden side passages: to their disappointment, they found neither a network of tunnels nor treasure.

The initial 1742 clearance does not seem to have been very thorough. During a visit later in the same year, the antiquary William Stukeley (1687-1765) found a decorative pipeclay object with a fleur-de-lys design at one end (Figure 4). He interpreted it as a medieval seal die, but no-one else has ever seen the object and its present whereabouts is unknown. Pipeclay was used in the Roman period to make small figurines (some of which seem to have been children's toys, while others were religious trinkets). It was not widely used during the Middle Ages except for providing a white slip to fill impressed designs in decorated floor tiles. Its use became commonplace during the sixteenth century for the manufacture of clay tobacco pipes; during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was also used to make wig curlers. It is probably safe to discount this as a medieval object, despite attempts to use the form of the fleur-de-lys to date it stylistically to the Middle Ages.

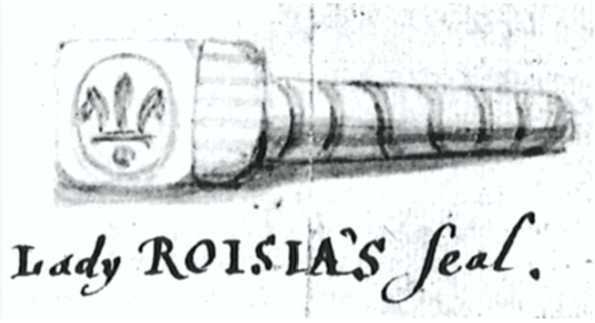

Lady ROISIA'S Seal.

Figure 4: the only image of the pipeclay object, fancifully described by William Stukeley as Lady Roisia's Seal

The clearance did reveal a mystery, though: there was a band of strange carvings on the wall below the level of the soil in the chamber. Thomas Watson, the owner of the cave, opened it to the public, digging a new entrance tunnel in 1790. It runs from part of the wall with no carvings to his house on the opposite side of Melbourn Street. He charged 6d (2½p) for a visit, equivalent to about £3.50 in 2020 prices. It has remained open ever since, closing only for maintenance and emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020.

In 1853, the local antiquaries Joseph Beldam (1795-1866) and Edmund Brook Nunn (1833-1904) excavated the rammed earth floor of the cave. Beldam later wrote that there were finds proving an ancient origin, showing that the cave was constructed before the medieval period. Unfortunately, Beldam's account of the discoveries was brief, and he did not elaborate on what they were. However, he did describe it as a *columbarium*, a Roman tomb. Perhaps the finds were of Roman date.

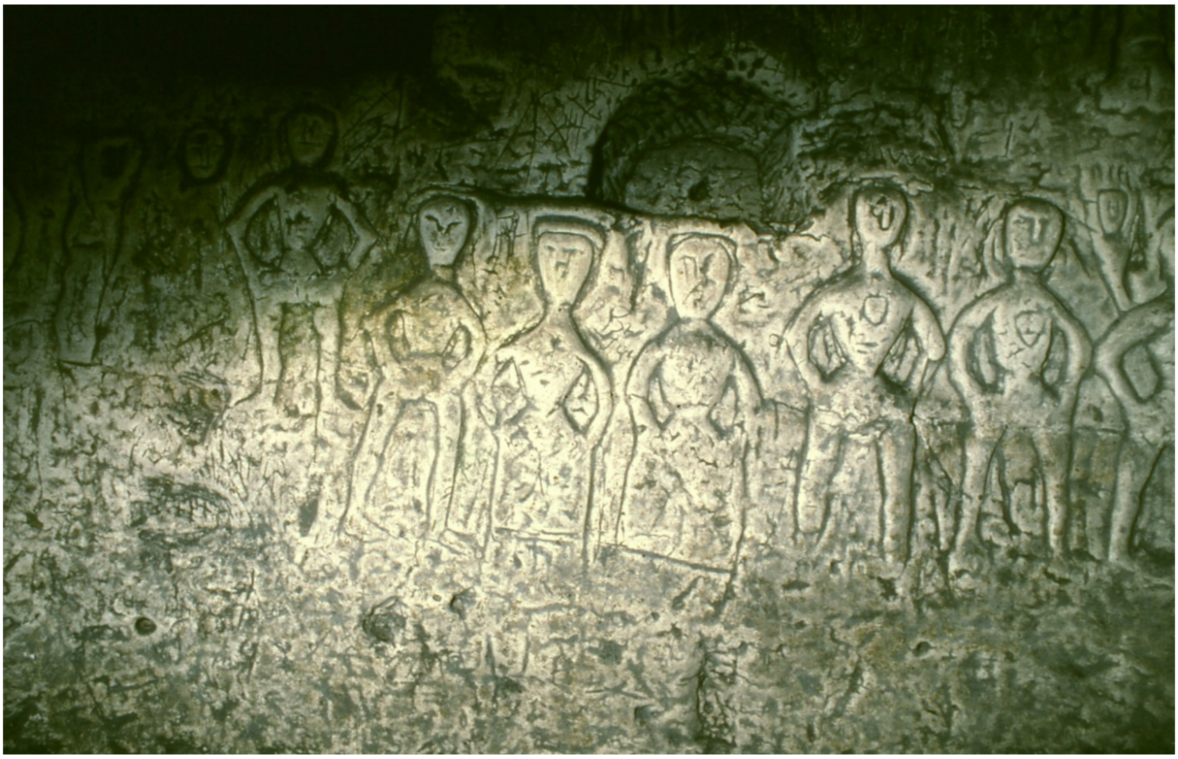


Figure 5: a group of figures carved in the lower part of the cave

A small excavation was carried out in 1966 by John Moss-Eccardt of Letchworth Museum and F J Smith of Royston History Society. They focused on the area known as the 'grave', a depression in the floor underneath the original entrance. They found predominantly 18th and 19th century material, dating from the time after the rediscovery of the cave. Although some sherds have been described

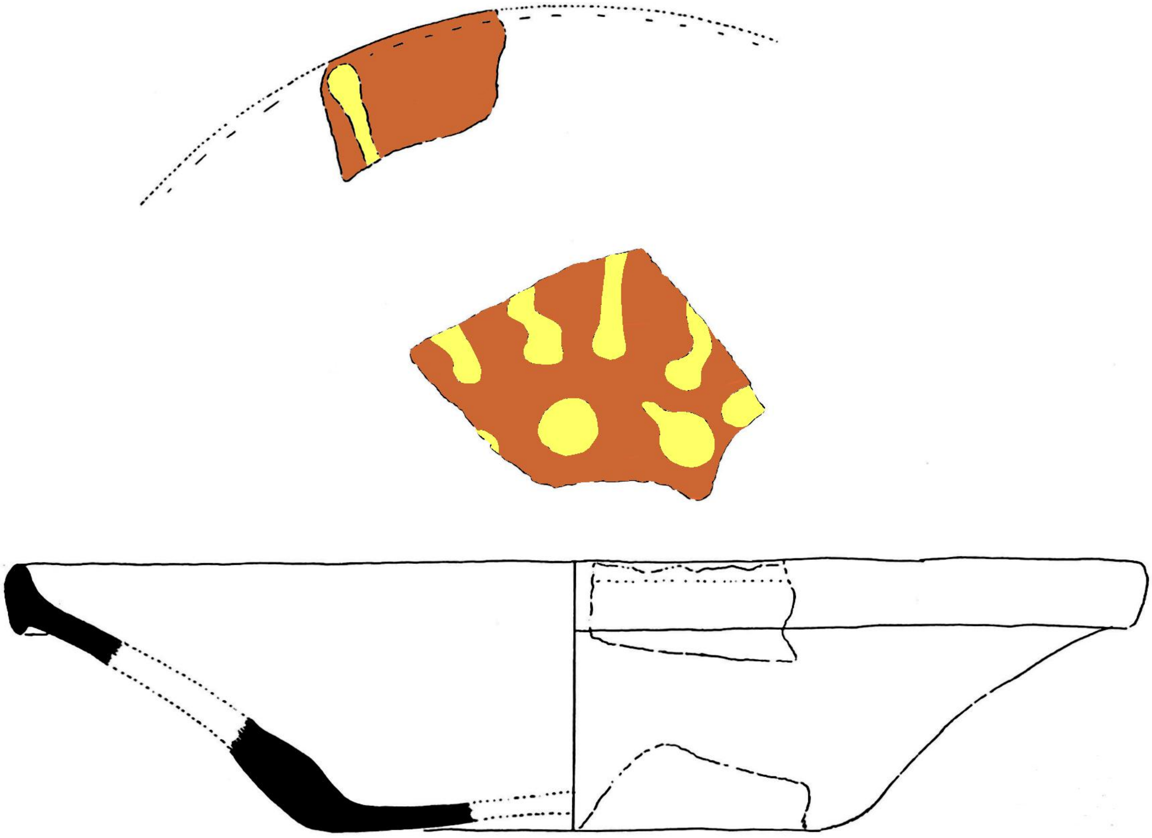


Figure 6: the supposedly medieval potsherds from the cave are really eighteenth-century slipware

as 'medieval', they are a well-known eighteenth-century type, slipware that was possibly made in Harlow (Figure 6). A resistivity survey undertaken on 26 June 1972 revealed a couple of anomalies beneath the floor. Further excavation 1973 and 1976 located a hollow in the centre of the floor and a possible posthole (Figure 7), although it is not clear how this had been overlooked by Beldam and Nunn.

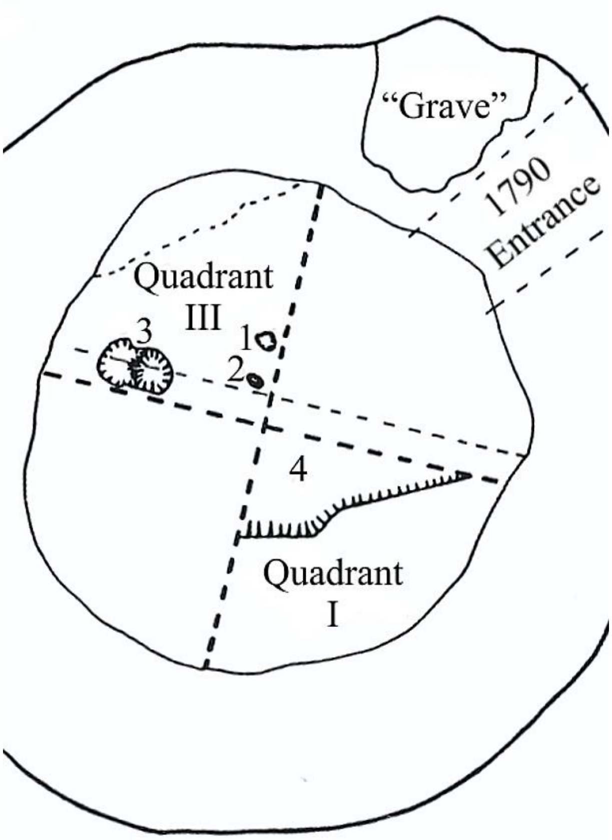


Figure 7: Lisa Donel's plan of the excavated features beneath the floor of the cave

Description of the cave

The inside of the cave is like the inside of a bottle carved into the solid chalk bedrock of the town. It was originally around 5.2 metres (17 feet) in diameter and 7.7 metres (25 feet 6 inches) high. A narrow shaft some 0.6 m (two feet) long leads up from the centre of the 'dome' to ground level. It seems to have been cut after the cave was discovered but before the 1880s. During the nineteenth century, the upper part of the 'dome' was removed and replaced with brickwork and steel plates.

When first found, the cave was entered through a vertical shaft 0.6 metres (2 feet) in diameter and 4.8 metres (16 feet) deep, which had toe holes on the sides to aid access.

The lower, cylindrical, part of the chamber has vertical walls around three metres (10 feet) high. The lower part of its walls is covered in carvings made in low relief. Around the edge is a low step, some 0.2 metres (eight inches) high and 0.9 metres (three feet) wide. Its inner face is a regular octagon. To the northeast, beneath the original shaft entrance, is a feature known as the 'grave', cut through the raised step to a depth of around 0.9 m (three feet) and some 2.3 m (seven feet six inches) long. In the 'dome', immediately above the grave, another shaft leads upwards, its entrance partly blocked by ashlar and brickwork (and which was completely blocked at the time of discovery).

The carvings

The carvings are what has prompted the most interest in the cave and the source of controversy. They are overwhelmingly religious, including crucifixion scenes and easily recognisable saints (Figure 8). The style is crude, and the work was undertaken by people unskilled in carving and who were not naturally talented as artists. In places, there are signs of alteration, and it is therefore likely that several people executed the sculptures over many years. There is also a lot of eighteenth to twentieth-century graffiti, raising important questions about the authenticity of some of the carvings. No detailed visual record was made of them before Joseph Beldam wrote his account of the cave in the middle of the nineteenth century, more than a hundred years after it was first rediscovered. Stukeley's drawings from 1742 show less detail than Beldam's and suffer from the imaginative 'restoration' of details such as hairstyles. His booklet was not published until 1784, eighteen years after his death, and the reasons for the delay in the publication are not known. Nevertheless, the majority of the carvings are in a similar style.

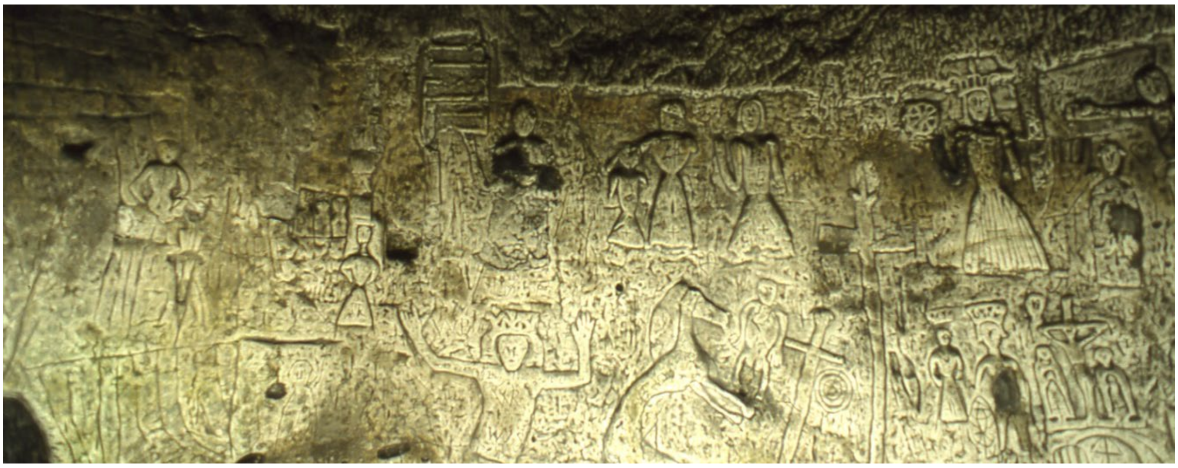


Figure 8: part of the cave's frieze, with a recognisable St catherine (holding a wheel) to the right

Beldam divided the scenes in the cave into fifteen groups, beginning with the 'High Altar' on the west wall. Stukeley identified it as such, conjecturing that it is on the 'wrong' side to place it close to the cross in the market place. Here, the Passion of Christ is depicted, with Jesus on the cross, attended by two people who have been identified as the Virgin Mary and the Beloved Disciple (John). The scene is muddled by the presence of additional figures, which Beldam suggested were added later. The other scenes identified by Beldam are the legend of St Christopher, the legend of St Catherine of Alexandria, a major effigy of the same St Catherine (separated from the legend by the 'High Altar'), the Invention of the Cross by St Helena, the Holy Family, a major effigy of St Laurence, the Conversion of St Paul, King William the Lion of Scotland, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, a shrine to St John the Baptist and St Thomas à Becket, King Henry II of England, King Richard Cœur de Lion and Queen Berengaria, and a group of people identified as a genealogy. Some of these identifications are certain (St Catherine and St Laurence, for instance), while others (the various Plantagenet English monarchs, for instance) are much less so.

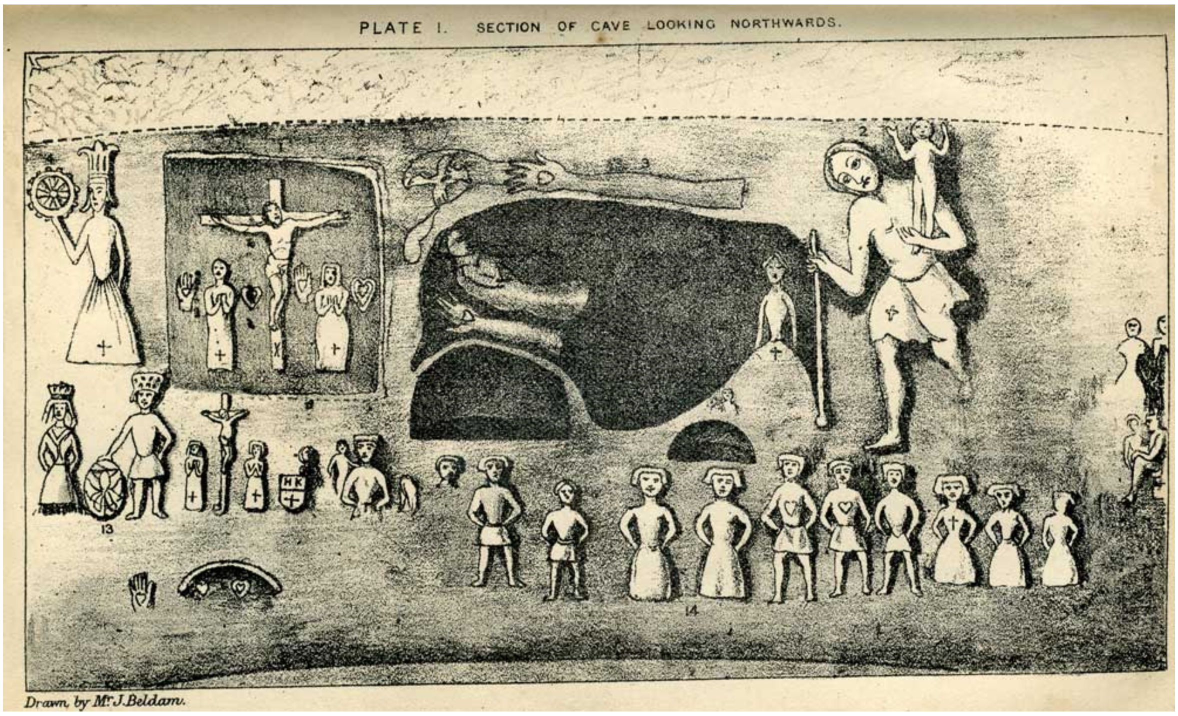


PLATE I. SECTION OF CAVE LOOKING NORTHWARDS.
1
2
3
13
HK
14
Drawn by Mr J.Beldam.

Figure 9: Beldam's illustration of part of the frieze (St Catherine is to the left)

Beldam used the iconography of the carvings to suggest a date. Noting that the men do not wear beards and that none of the knights appears fully coated in plate armour, he suggested that the carvings date from the twelfth or thirteenth century. The presence of King Richard Cœur de Lion and Berengaria – if the carvings do represent this royal couple – would suggest a date after 1191, when they were married. On the other hand, some have claimed to see plate armour of fourteenth or fifteenth-century type and two dates have been carved on the walls of the cave: a single year figure of 1347 carved into the dome and not recorded before Beldam's time, and a brief inscription reading *Martin 18 February 1350*. It is unclear how authoritative these figures are. Beldam was sceptical of the 1347 date and conjectured that it might have been altered from 1547. The use of Arabic numerals in the middle of the fourteenth century, while not impossible, would be unusual; the precisely contemporary graffiti in the tower of nearby Ashwell church uses the more usual roman numerals to express dates.

What this doesn't tell us, of course, is when the carvings were created or when the cave itself was dug (assuming that the two are not necessarily connected). They include religious imagery: there is a large depiction of St Catherine of Alexandria, holding the wheel on which she was martyred, St Christopher crossing the river with a baby Jesus on his shoulder, a Crucifixion scene and St Laurence with a gridiron. Many others are more obscure, including depictions of people wearing crowns (and one whose crown hovers above their head), and yet others whose precise interpretation is debatable. For instance, a figure identified by the eccentric and controversial archaeologist Tom Lethbridge as a sheela-na-gig and claimed to have pagan associations does not resemble any other depiction of these figures (which, despite their supposedly 'pagan' meaning, are found in ecclesiastical contexts).

Most researchers have looked for parallels for the carvings in the High Middle Ages, which has been the assumed date since the carvings were first recognised. Stukeley proposed that some represented the family of Lady Roisia, the supposed eponym of Royston, although this is very unlikely. Sylvia Beamon has seen Templar iconography in the circular shape of the cave and carvings of Palestinian (Hebraic) symbols.

Questions of authenticity

Stukeley drew the carvings in 1742, but his sketches show little detail and have imaginative 'restoration'. Beldam's drawings, published in his booklet in 1858, show more details than Stukeley. However, neither publication matches what can be seen today: there are many more small details that neither writer recorded. It is impossible to know how much has been altered over time. It must also be borne in mind that Stukeley and Beldam were working in candlelight or with oil lamps, so illumination would have been poor.

The search for parallels

Sylvia Beamon has compared Royston Cave with one at Sloup in the Czech Republic. This consists of a bottle-shaped chamber, which was established as a prison and donjon in the late 13th/early 14th century. It was later used as a hermitage between 1690 and 1785. She has also drawn parallels with carvings at the Donjon du Coudray in the Château de Chinon, long believed to have been carved by Templars held there in 1309. The carvings include hearts, Stars of David, grids and geometrical patterns (Figure 10). These are relatively commonplace devices and are not uniquely associated with the Templars. The Templar connection with the carvings has also been thoroughly debunked by Hervé Poidevin, an expert on medieval graffiti, who has shown them to be later in date. As we have already seen, the stylistic arguments are contradictory over the date.

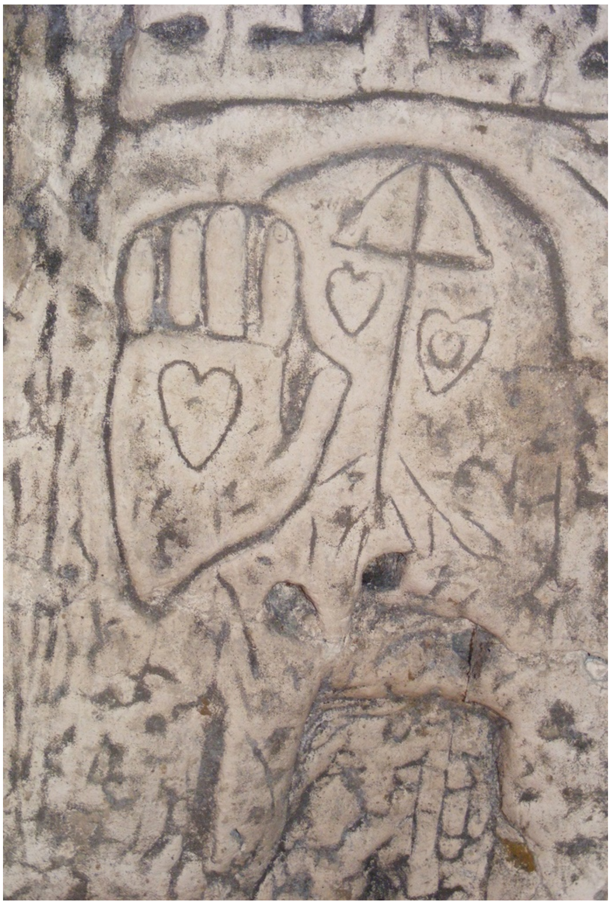


Figure 10: non-figurative carvings, including a hand and hearts

So why has the standard interpretation of the carvings settled around the idea that the Knights Templar created them? There are two principal arguments used in favour of the identification: iconographic and stylistic. In the former case, it is suggested that there is a strong militaristic element to some of the carvings, with depictions of knights in armour. While there are armoured figures in the cave, they are not numerous and at least one of them has been thought to represent either St George or St Michael (probably the former, as it has a George Cross incised on its chest). They appear to be wearing plate armour, which would date them to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, too late for the Templars. Moreover, the distinctive Templar symbol of two knights on horseback, intended to show that their self-imposed poverty forced them to share horses, is completely absent from the cave.

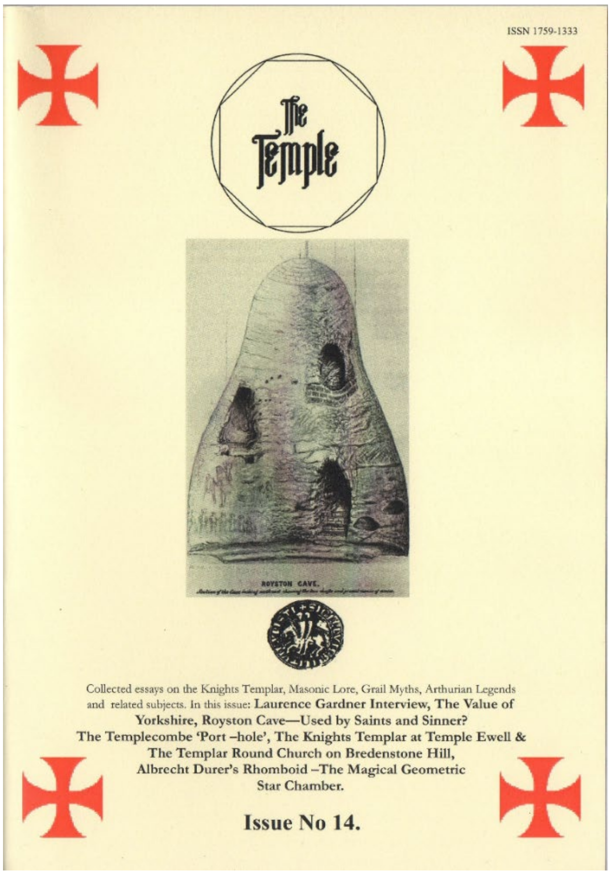
The Templars and Royston

If we are to ascribe the religious carvings in Royston Cave to the Knights Templar, we must examine evidence for their presence in the town. We know that Templar knights traded in the market as they had disputes with the Prior over the payment of tolls. There is no evidence that they owned property in the town and the traders were probably from Baldock. It has been claimed that there was a Templar Preceptory in Shingay, but this is a misreading of the Victoria County History of Cambridgeshire, which shows that it was founded by the Knights Hospitaller 1144×54. The Templars were granted rights to Wendy Church about 1170, hence the confusion.

Beyond the Knights Templar

A link with the Templars has become the new consensus view of the cave (or, at least, its carvings). The order has often been portrayed as surviving its official suppression in 1309-12, particularly among conspiracy-minded popular writers. Documents released and published by the Vatican in the 1990s show that the Church was concerned by the order's supposedly heretical views. These included allegations that new knights were ordered to trample a cross and that they worshipped a head called Baphomet. It is probably more likely that the order's wealth and independence from papal control were a deciding factor.

Some writers from the eighteenth century on have tried to show that Freemasonry descends from the Templars. This idea was first promoted by Scottish Freemasons and popularised in the late twentieth century. There is no evidence to link the two and all the seventeenth-century and earlier documents used to provide links relate to stonemasons, not the speculative religious brotherhood.



ISSN 1759-1333

The Temple

ROYSTON CAVE.

Collected essays on the Knights Templar, Masonic Lore, Grail Myths, Arthurian Legends and related subjects. In this issue: **Laurence Gardner Interview, The Value of Yorkshire, Royston Cave—Used by Saints and Sinner?**
The Templecombe 'Port –hole', The Knights Templar at Temple Ewell &
The Templar Round Church on Bredenstone Hill,
Albrecht Durer's Rhomboid –The Magical Geometric
Star Chamber.

Issue No 14.

Figure 11: publications by modern self-proclaimed 'Templars' take a connection with Royston cave as an established fact

These supposed connections reached their peak with the publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln in 1982. They sought to present the Templars as guardians of an 'explosive secret' that could destroy the foundations of western civilisation. The 'secret' was that Jesus had married Mary Magdalene and that their descendants were the power behind the Templars. A 'bloodline of Christ' thus influenced much of European history and was a shadower power behind the European Union. Although the book and its sequel, *The Messianic Legacy*, sold well, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln's ideas were popularised by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the best-selling books of all time, shifting more than 100,000 copies a week early in 2004. He notoriously claimed on the very first page, before the novel begins, that '[*a*]*ll descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate*'. They were not.

So much has been written about the supposed 'Bloodline of Christ' that it ought to be unnecessary to discredit it every time it's raised. The Prieuré de Sion, supposed to be the secret power behind the Templars and Freemasons, did not exist before the 1950s. Freemasonry has no connection with the Knights Templar. There is no shadowy conspiracy directing the history of the western world run by Knights Templar/Freemasons/the Illuminati/the Grand Master of the Prieuré de Sion/a descendant of Jesus of Nazareth. The Knights Templar disappeared from history following the suppression of their Order in 1312. Freemasonry as an organised set of beliefs did not exist before the later seventeenth century, at the earliest. If Jesus had one or more children, he could potentially have millions of descendants alive today, but there is not the slightest evidence that he did. There is little point in pursuing these conspiracy theories of history.

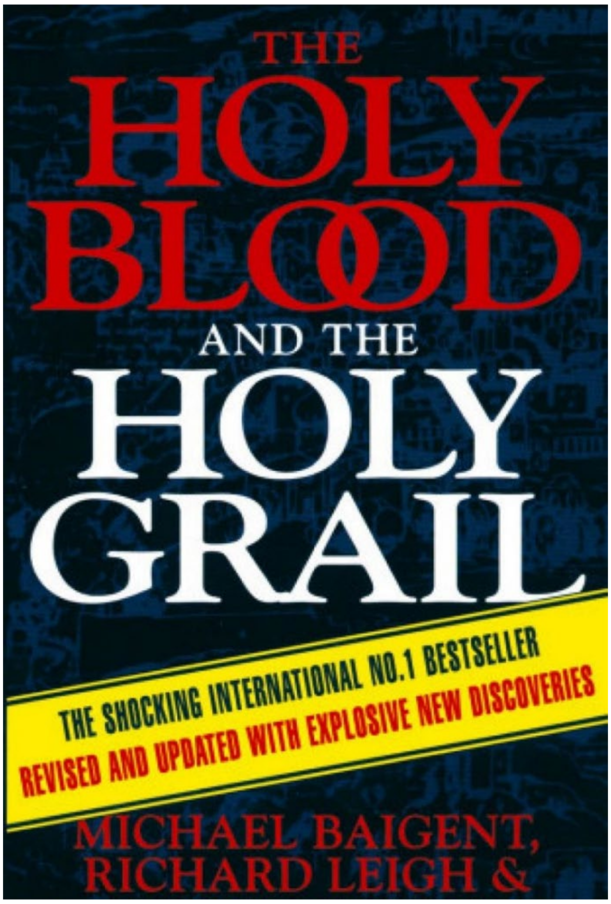

THE
HOLY
BLOOD
AND THE
HOLY
GRAIL
THE SHOCKING INTERNATIONAL NO.1 BESTSELLER
REVISED AND UPDATED WITH EXPLOSIVE NEW DISCOVERIES
MICHAEL BAIGENT,
RICHARD LEIGH &

Figure 12: the book that launched a thousand conspiracy theories as well as the best-selling novel of all time

There are unconfirmed reports that a second potential cave has been identified in Melbourn Street. A ground probing radar survey was carried out in February 2008 as part of the filming for a television series, *Quest*, which promoted a Masonic conspiracy theory about the origins of the Knights Templar. The series was never aired in the UK but went straight to DVD release. In view of the sensationalist nature of the programme, doubt should be cast on the claims. No attempt has ever been made to publish the results of the survey.

Acceptance of these ideas has led to the promotion of some very strange ideas about the cave. There are supposed to be pagan symbols, including a fertility goddess. The supposedly Christian symbols are Manichaean, deriving from a Christian sect that survived until the twentieth century among the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. It is said to be at a crossing of ley lines (which do not exist). James VI/I had his palace in Royston because he was a Freemason and used the cave for secret, abominable rites. There is no point in pursuing such claims, which pile unfounded supposition on top of unwarranted speculation and reach conclusions so wrong and hydra-like that they become impossible to debunk.

For a site with so little solid data, there is a real risk of over-interpreting what little informatpostholeexits. For instance, the post-hole found in 1976 may well have supported a platform. Further evidence for an internal floor exists as slots in the wall above the carvings, which would have turned the cave into a two-storey structure, with the religious scenes below and the upper floor reserved for some other purpose. A bizarre suggestion has been made that the upper floor was in the shape of a six-pointed star, with one of the points pivoted and carrying a cresset (an open oil lamp). It need not be pointed out that this is mere fantasy. There likely was an upper floor, although we cannot determine details of its form. However, the 'Star of David' floor has been presented on an information board in the cave as a serious interpretation.

The true origins of the cave: a suggestion

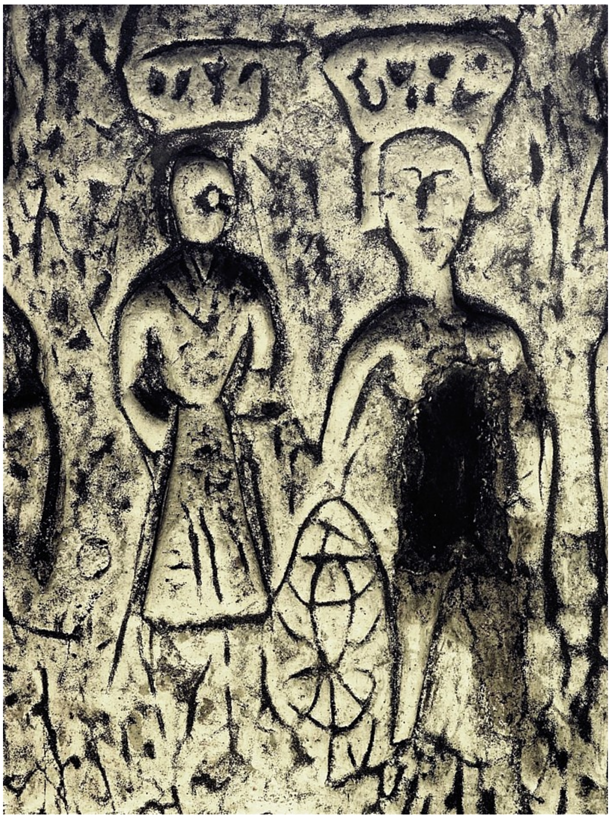


Figure 13: Berengaria and Richard I or Edward V and Edward IV?

What if the present consensus about the connection of the Knights Templar with Royston Cave is wrong? In 2007, Joanna Mattingly made an intriguing suggestion in the *BBC History* magazine. She pointed to a small figure with a crown 'floating' above its head, which has previously been identified with Berengaria, wife of Richard I, who was never crowned queen (Figure 13). Instead, it resembles a late fifteenth-century image of the uncrowned Edward V at in the chantry chapel of Bishop Oliver King (*c* 1430-1502) of St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. The painting was part of the memorial to the bishop, who had served the infant son of Henry VI, Edward IV, Edward V and Henry VII. The religious iconography is similar to graffiti at Carlisle Castle, carved into red sandstone, a more durable rock. The work is as unskilled as at Royston but is known to date from the 1480s. A shrine base at St Issey, also of late fifteenth-century date, has similar iconography. Joanna Mattingly further pointed out that St George is shown wearing plate armour of fifteenth-century style.

Many late medieval churches are known to have identical graffiti, mostly dating from the fifteenth century. They had not been recognised when the cave was first discovered, making Royston's seem mysterious. Generally covered over by post-Reformation whitewash designed to obliterate traces of 'popish' imagery, they have become increasingly visible in churches as the walls have been cleaned since the later twentieth century. These graffiti fall into the same basic style and similar themes. The same popular saints recur, including the Virgin Mary, St Catherine and St Christopher. Apotropaic marks, designed to ward off evil, include hands and hearts (claimed at Royston to be evidence for Freemasons) and abstract designs. Matthew Champion, especially, has shown how commonplace these carvings are in English churches.

Given that the carvings were probably created by people who were unversed in the techniques and canons of the high art of their day, how useful is it to apply Art Historical analytical techniques in an attempt to date them? Where they have been used, there seems to be no agreement. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner suggested that they are '*probably of various dates between the C14 and C17 (the work of unskilled men)*'. Lilian Redstone in the *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire* thought that they were "*probably carved in the 13th or 14th century*", with which the Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record concurs. Writing for *The British Association for Local History*, Joanna Mattingley suggested a late fifteenth-century date for some of the carvings and a seventeenth-century date for some letter forms. Evidently, we can't get very far using stylistic analysis!

The implications of a late fifteenth-century date

If the carvings date from *c* 1480-1500, we have a candidate for their creation. A hermit living in Royston died around 1506 when he bequeathed a sum of money to the parish of Bassingbourn, recorded in the churchwarden's accounts of the parish. A hermitage in Barkway parish (south of Melbourn Street and east of King Street) was bought by Robert Chester in 1540, at the time of the Dissolution of the Priory in the town. Royston Cave lies beneath Mebourn Street, where Barkway and Bassingbourn parishes met. During the sixteenth century, the lord of the manor is said to have '*buylded up in the myddest of Icknell Streate… a fayer House or Crosse… for a clockhowse and a Pryson Howse*'. The lord of the manor concerned was the same Sir Robert Chester who had purchased the hermitage.

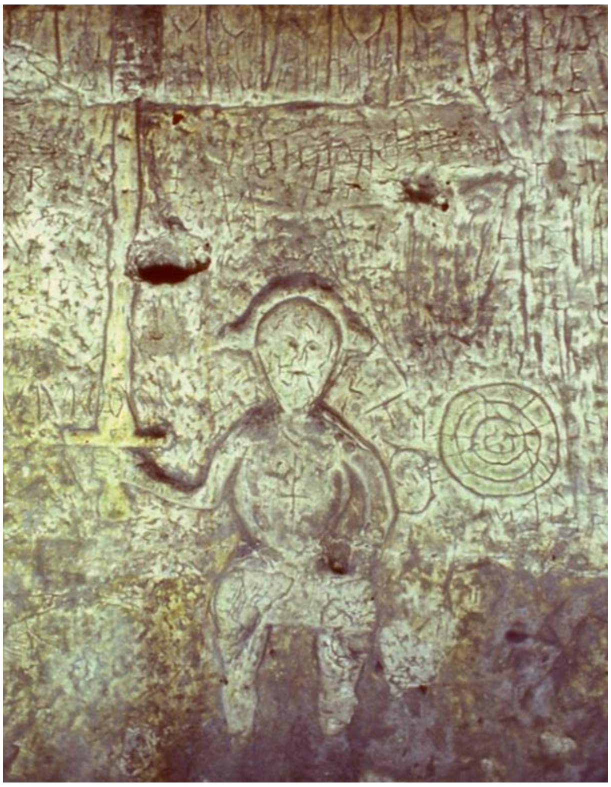


Figure 14: St George, identified by the cross oh his chest, wearing fifteenth-century plate armour

It is therefore likely that the cave was a hermitage during the later fifteenth century. The scenes are unquestionably religious and not heretical or pagan in any way. There is significantly no trace of Templar symbolism. The figures are not the work of an artist and were perhaps made by several people over many years, which would account for the repetition of saints and crucifixions. Religious visions may have inspired the carver. The site is close to the Augustinian Priory but independent of it. Hermits were occasionally loosely connected with religious houses, which was perhaps the case here.

Infilling

Robert Chester's structure '*in the myddest of Icknell Streate*' built about 1550 included '*a Pryson Howse*'. If it were constructed over the half-filled cave, the underground chamber would have made an excellent prison from which escape would be almost impossible. The cup found in 1742 lends plausibility to this suggestion. It is described as having been brown earthenware with yellow dots, which fits a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century type known as slipware. Although slipwares were still in use at the time the cave was rediscovered, they were going out of fashion and many older forms and styles would have been unfamiliar by then. From the description given, there is no reason to regard this vessel as being any earlier than the sixteenth century; it certainly does not sound like a medieval type (brown with yellow dots was not a fashionable colour for pottery, while mugs were an introduction of the later fourteenth century). Similarly, the pipeclay object found by Stukeley is unlikely to be any earlier than the later sixteenth century.

What we can deduce about the material found during the initial exploration of the cave suggests that the fills date from the late sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, not the Middle Ages. This proposal fits well with the documentary evidence. The covering of the carvings may have been because they were seen as 'popish' and if not to be destroyed, then hidden from view. It is even possible that the fill was intended to protect them from iconoclast attention.

Even if we can suggest a late fifteenth-century date for most of the carvings, they do not reveal when the cave was constructed. Its form may hold a clue. Bottle-shaped chalk quarries are known in England and France (where they are known as *catiches*). Their distribution in England is mostly around the Thames Estuary, where chalk is the typical bedrock. Some were discovered at Chells in 2011 and found to be Roman in date. However, the form is long-lived, with the earliest examples occurring in the Late Iron Age onwards and some continuing to be made into the twentieth century. The foundation of the Priory *c* 1166 provides a context for quarrying. Melbourn Rock, at the base of the local chalk, is the only decent stone for building and this is what the cave is cut into. It can, therefore, be suggested that Royston cave originated as a quarry connected with the establishment of the Augustinian Priory to its southeast. There may indeed be other examples, as local folklore insists.

A mystery dispelled?

Does my analysis remove the mystery of Royston Cave? It answers questions about its origins, the date of the carvings (about 1480-1500) and its origin (when the priory was founded about 1166). The purpose of the images is not obscure as they are standard late medieval religious iconography and could have been made by anyone with religious knowledge. Were they the product of someone we might today characterise as a religious fanatic, half-mad through self-imposed incarceration?

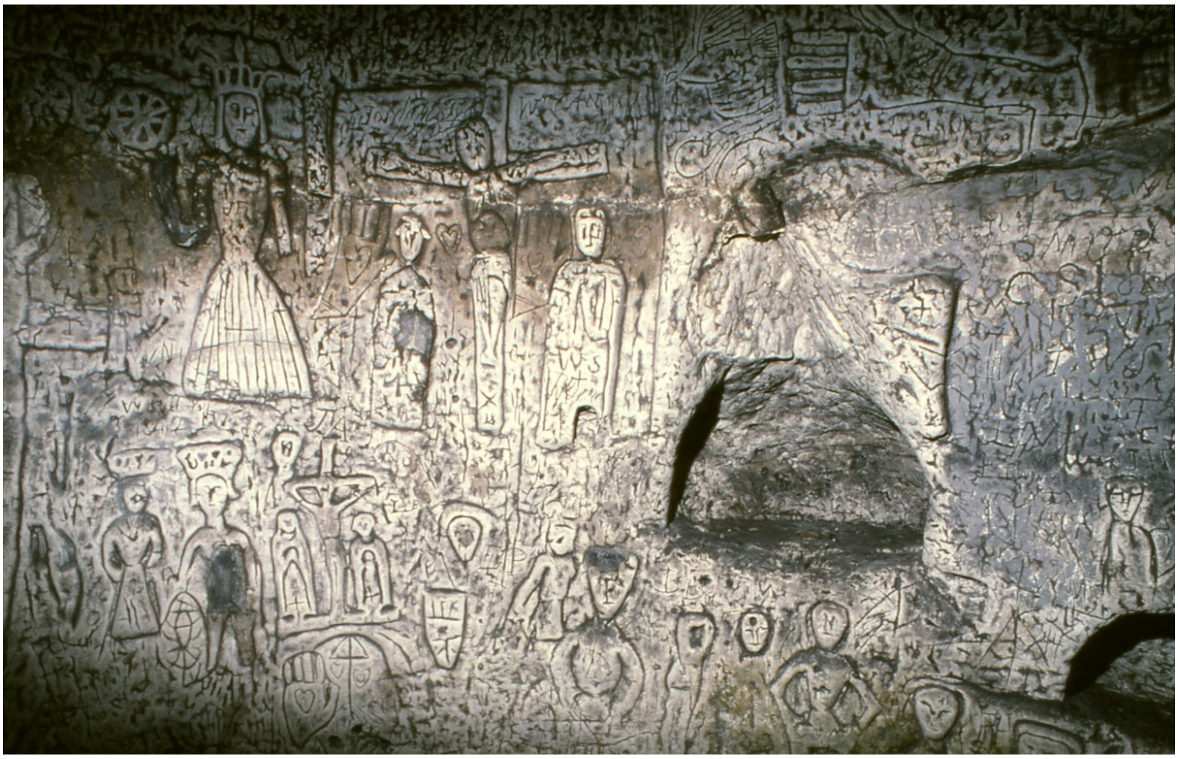


Figure 15: two crucifixions almost next to each other

Conspiracy theories about the cave are popular, though. They have an emotional appeal that mainstream history does not. They place the believer in a privileged position, making them feel wiser than academics, more in tune with the way the world works than the rest of the population and able to see through the guile of politicians. They don't need to follow the boring, analytical methodologies of traditional historians. In a very telling passage, the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* dismiss analysis and talk grandly about how "*the techniques of academic scholarship were sorely inadequate… we were obliged to adopt a more comprehensive approach, based on synthesis rather than conventional analysis*"; in other words, they announced how they were prepared to accept data that in ordinary circumstances really ought to be ignored as worthless. We see exactly the same attitude in Sue Carter's parting comment that "*you just cannot ignore the connections and possibilities of these sites and their hidden histories*", which is typical conspiracist thinking. Many of the connections just don't exist while the possibilities turn out to be exceedingly remote and not worth pursuing.

It is a sad reflection of modern education that so many people can grow to maturity lacking the critical faculties that would enable them to see through many of the false stories they are sold in the name of history. Critical thinking is a valuable life skill that we are rarely taught. Fact-checking is rarely carried out by journalists, who often regurgitate the same press releases, adding a little editorial spin in the process, a phenomenon that has been dubbed '*Churnalism*'. It is worrying that in an age when access to information is almost instantaneous, thanks to the internet, that people either cannot be bothered to check basic facts (a shocking lapse when it comes to journalists) or are prepared to accept anything they read that challenges the mainstream view of how the world works. People have always been happy to accept false stories in the name of history (or politics, economics etc.). The well-known anecdote of Marie Antoniette declaring '*Let them eat cake!*' when told that the peasants were starving was first attributed to an unnamed princess long before she was born.

Those who subscribe to conspiracy-oriented accounts of the past often cling to them with an emotional attachment that can seem inexplicable. Any suggestion that the supposed Templar connection is dubious, even wrong, can be met with hostility. When I first wrote a blog post about Royston Cave in March 2008, a complaint was made about it to my manager. The post was written in my own time as a hobby, but I placed a disclaimer on the page that it was not the official view of North Hertfordshire District Council. Two more complaints followed, accusing me of misrepresenting the work of others, of failing to read the relevant publications and of pursuing a campaign of disinformation. I happily corrected a few factual errors that were pointed out. However, it has been clear to me since the first complaint that there is a faction that wants to see my article expressing scepticism of supposed Templar links taken down because it questions the current consensus.

All in all, Royston Cave is a fascinating place. A visit is not easily forgotten as the site exudes an aura of mystery (aided by the guide's narrative, which stresses the mysterious) and the carvings are memorable for their symbolism, their crudeness and their unfamiliarity. However, the current consensus rests on several utterly false assumptions and improbable analogies, but it has the appeal of romance. It is not a repository of dark secrets and conspiracies bu a monument to religious expression of a type that we do not often see in the contemporary West. That is its real importance.

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
July 2020