



# The Banwell Caves

In 1759 miners discovered a cave on Banwell Hill. It contained a deep lake and some stunning limestone stalactites and soon became known as the Stalactite Cave.

Getting into the cave was difficult and after some years the entrance shaft collapsed, shutting the cave off to visitors once more.



*Inside the Stalactite Cave © Tim Rose*

In 1824 the Vicar of Banwell, Francis Randolph, decided to find a new way into the cave. His aim was to develop it as a tourist attraction which might bring in enough money to pay for a school in the village.

He paid a couple of miners to dig a new tunnel. Not only did the miners find a new way into the Stalactite Cave but they also broke through into another cave. This second one contained a large quantity of ancient animal bones mixed together with rocks and soil.

The land on Banwell Hill belonged to George Henry Law, the Bishop of Bath and Wells. By a strange chance, he had been appointed to the post that very same year. He was excited by the discovery of such a quantity of bones as he saw in them evidence for Noah's Flood.

**According to the Bible, God punished humans for their wicked behaviour by causing a great flood to cover the Earth. Only Noah and his family were saved because God told him to build a great boat (The Ark) and take with him two of all the animals.**

The Bishop now had his own vision for the site. He decided to turn it into an early kind of theme park linking human sin and the Flood.



*The ruins of the original Osteoicon, now rebuilt © Bob Kingsley*

Bishop Law chose a local farmer to manage the project. His name was William Beard and he threw himself into the task with zeal. The result of this joint enterprise was that the caves were cleared and provided with steps and doorways.

The bones were collected and put on display. Some were neatly stacked in the Bone Cave itself and others housed in a small custom-made building nearby called The Osteoicon.

This was just one of a number of buildings that went up around the grounds. There was a cottage for the Bishop which was later enlarged into a substantial house. He also had a summer house, decorated with beach pebbles, and a 50 ft. tower with a magnificent view.



*Banwell Tower* © Bob Kingsley

In addition to all this the Bishop filled the grounds with structures and memorials designed to promote his view of the Biblical Flood and its lesson for humanity. He set up fake archaeological remains. He displayed verses telling the story of the Flood and warning of God's wrath towards heathens and wrongdoers. We must remember that in Bishop Law's day geological time was not well understood and Darwin's theory of evolution had not yet been published.



*The bones on display in the cave* © Andrew Norman

Today we know that the bones were deposited in the cave over a period of time. They were the remains of animals that had died on the surface and were later washed into the cave by water from rivers or melting ice.

The commonest animal bones discovered were those of bison and the most spectacular those of a huge Brown Bear. Other species such as wolf and reindeer lead scientists to believe that the landscape at the time was similar to the Arctic Tundra of eighty thousand years ago.

Bishop Law spent his final days at Banwell and died there in 1845. William Beard died in 1868 at the age of 96. By this time science had moved on and most people no longer accepted the biblical version of the Flood and Noah's Ark as fact.

Without Beard's guiding hand the once popular Caves became neglected and largely forgotten. For the next hundred years or so the buildings gradually decayed and easy access to the Stalactite Cave was lost once more.



*The entrance to the Bone Cave* © Bob Kingsley

The present owners have done a lot to restore the site and it is once more possible to visit the Bone Cave and explore the other caves by arrangement.



Weston-super-Mare  
Town Council