

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND TELEVISION AT FISHMONGER'S SWALLET

by

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### ABSTRACT

The archaeological investigations which were carried out during filming at Fishmonger's Swallet by *Time Team* and *National Geographic* are described. The key finding of the former was a series of Iron Age postholes to the south of the cave; the latter carried out a Strontium isotope analysis of rodent bones and a newly recovered human tooth which showed that the owner of the tooth lived locally.

### TIME TEAM INVESTIGATIONS, 2000

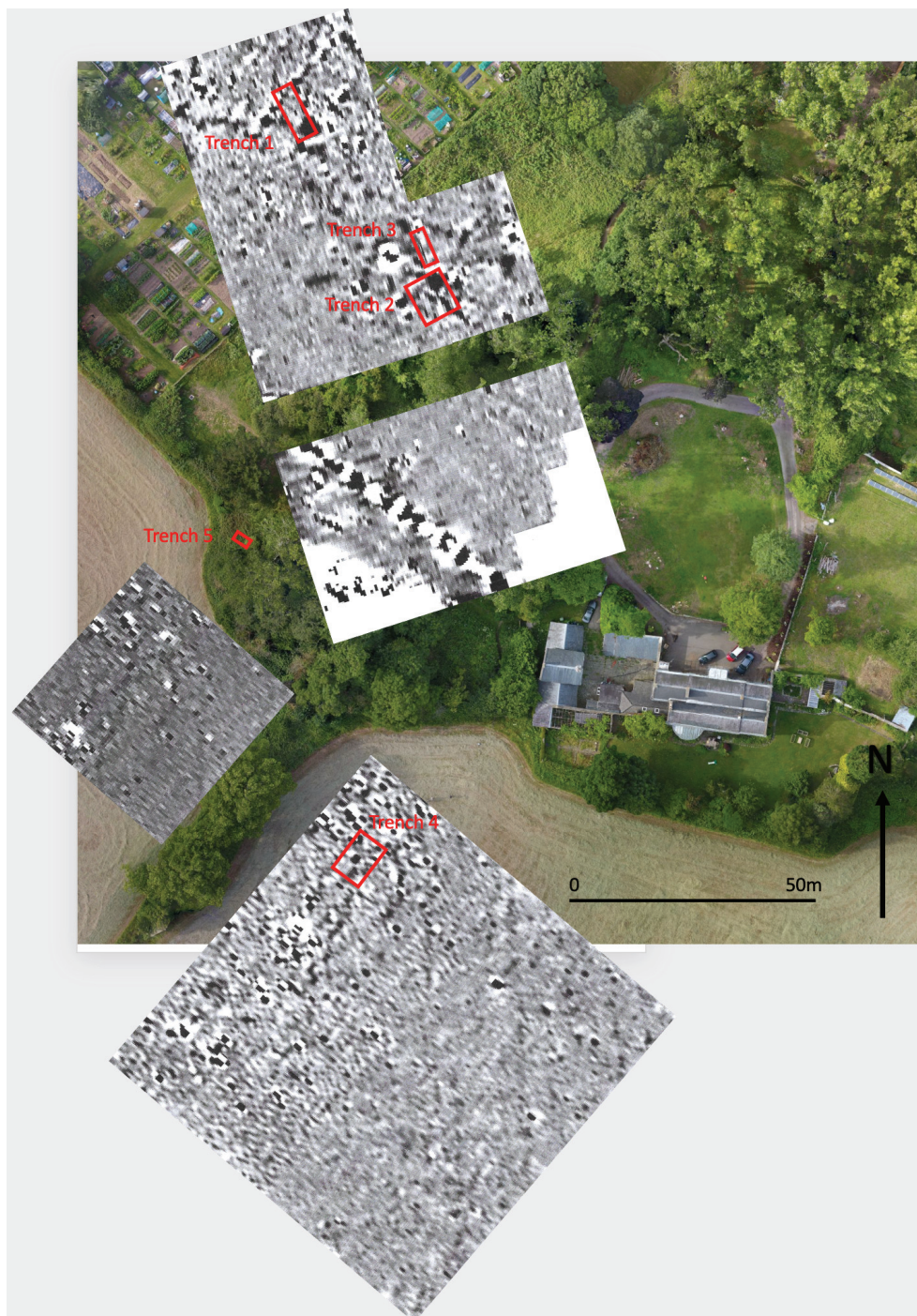
Following discussion with Time Team's production team (Hardwick, 2022, this volume) archaeological work at Fishmonger's swallet continued on a more formal basis with the three-day Time Team investigation that took place between 20<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> September 2000. The archaeological objective was to recover more bones and associated dating material from the swallet deposits, along with a geophysical survey of the surrounding area, with targeted excavations to recover potential contexts for the site and its landscape. The film was released in early 2001, as episode 8 of series 8 of Time Team, and at the time of writing is available through streaming on More Four.

The geophysical survey was undertaken by GSB Prospection, using magnetic and resistivity survey (GSB Prospection 2000). Four blocks were surveyed (Figure 1) and these informed the location of the test excavations. The approach of the Time Team investigators was 'target driven' to locate potential anomalies and to investigate them. Trenches were normally 1.5 m wide and dug by machine to subsoil or recognised archaeological deposits. If archaeological features were located the trenches would then be widened into an open area. Given the limited time for the project, 3 days, the investigations were of an evaluation type, with minimal removal of stratified archaeological stratigraphy. This was the approach taken here.

Trench 1 (Figure 2)<sup>1</sup> targeted an area to the north of the swallet, where there was a linear feature and a further magnetic anomaly to the south. On excavation, these could not be located and the trench produced only plough zone onto subsoil. The field where this trench was excavated is now allotments, and it would be difficult to undertake further work to back up this negative result. However, while the excavation was inconclusive, it is possible that the linear features form part of a late prehistoric field system.

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<sup>1</sup> The trench locations shown on the film are only approximate. The site plan given here has been drawn up from the observations at the time, the geophysical survey, and the aerial images taken at the time of the excavation, plotted onto a new aerial drone image. The original survey data from 2000 has been lost.

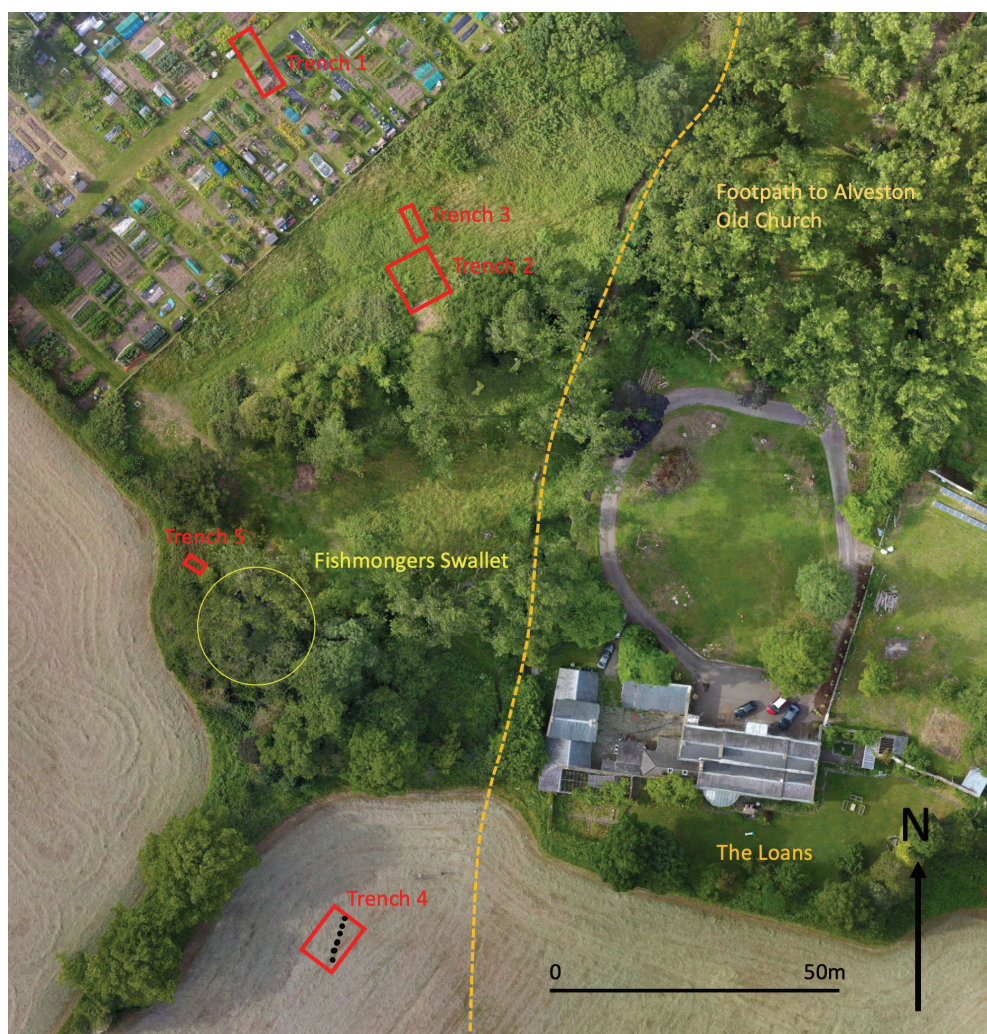


**Figure 1.** *Geophysical investigations: magnetic survey plots around Fishmonger's Swallet.*



On day two, work concentrated to the south of the swallet. Here the geophysical survey suggested a possible circular structure, around 8 m in diameter. Trench 4 was located to investigate this. Initially, two post holes were found, and when the trench was expanded (10 x 6 m), a further four post holes were identified. These seemed to form a line running in an approximately north-south direction. They were regularly spaced apart from post holes 2 and 3 that were slightly closer together. Each post hole was 0.35 m in diameter, and 0.25 m deep, and filled with a lighter brown loam than the surrounding subsoil. In the base of two of the post holes was a small sherd of iron age pottery.

Trench 5 (2 x 1 m) was located on the top edge of the swallet. This was to see if there were any surface traces relating to the use of the swallet. As elsewhere, there was a thin layer of topsoil overlying a sterile clay subsoil.



**Figure 2.** Aerial photograph of the immediate area around Fishmonger's Swallet, showing 2000 trench locations.

Work within the swallet was the main focus of the investigation. Here it was initially thought that stratified cave deposits might have been present, and substantial interior scaffolding was placed, so that the deposit could be excavated by context. However, this did not prove to be possible, and it soon became clear that the cave deposit was significantly mixed. The project did remove substantial quantity of deposit, all of which was wet-sieved on the surface, from the single layer. As well as the bones (see Bricking, *et al* 2022; Cox and Loe, 2022 and Peto, 2022 all this volume), there were a few finds mostly of a very recent date, but also two sherds of Dorset black burnished wares (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century) that were heavily worn, and likely washed into the swallet from the surrounding fields.

Apart from the recovery of additional bones, the key finding of the Time Team investigations was the discovery in Trench 4 of six post holes. two of these were excavated and found to contain sherds of pottery of Iron Age date. The remainder were not excavated. These were uncovered for a distance of 10 m, but it seems probable that they extend beyond the trench limits. The interpretation at the time was that they were the remains of some form of walkway, giving access to the swallet from the south. Further work would be needed to locate the other side of such a putative structure, and other interpretations are possible, especially as one of the excavated holes does not seem to be directly on the line of the others. The site of this trench was chosen as it seemed to encompass a slight circular anomaly and it is possible that at least some of the holes were associated with this. More excavation would be needed to clarify the matter.

#### NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TELEVISION INVESTIGATION

A very short investigation took place in 2006, for a film entitled Julius Caesar and the Druids This focused on the cave deposits and took place over two days. A small amount of material was brought up, and wet sieved for bones and artefacts. A small quantity of bone was recovered, while all the artefacts were of modern date.

A fresh human molar was excavated from the cave, along with some rodent bones. A useful analysis was undertaken of the strontium isotopes in the human and rodent bones by Hege Usbourne. These were tested in the Isotope laboratory at the Department of Archaeology at Bristol University. The strontium ratio (<sup>87</sup>Sr/<sup>86</sup>Sr) for the rodent and human specimens were comparable, suggesting that all the specimens were derived from the same local population.

#### FISHMONGER'S SWALLET WITHIN THE LATER IRON AGE LANDSCAPE

The Iron Age landscape of the Vale of Berkeley, in which Fishmonger's Swallet lies, has been little investigated archaeologically. Located between the Severn estuary and the Cotswold Edge, most of the data comes from development sites and a small number of research excavations. In general, the later Iron Age settlement patterns in the Severn valley are characterised by a densely occupied landscape with co-axial field systems, trackways and pit alignments (Moore, 2006: 72). Settlements tend to be dispersed in the landscape as rectangular or quadrilateral enclosures typically around 60 m in size (Aston and Iles, 1987: 49; Moore, 2006: 71) The closest excavated site at Frocester to the north, includes a ditched enclosure, later embellished with additional ditches (Price, 2000). A similar feature has been identified from aerial imaging at North Nibley (Crowther and Dickson, 2016: 34). To the south, at Hallen, a short-lived palisaded settlement of 3<sup>rd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century BC was excavated on the Avon levels,

occupying the rich estuarine marches and it is likely that there are similar sites along the estuarine edge further north (Gardiner, *et al* 2002).

There is a cluster of earthwork enclosures in the immediate vicinity of Fishmonger's Swallet, which while currently undated, most likely belong to the later Iron Age. The release of the Aerial Archaeology Mapping Explorer by Historic England<sup>2</sup> allows at least a partial reconstruction of the local landscape, albeit heavy masked by later ridge and furrow cultivation. Abbey Camp, 2.3 km to the north-east is a small univallate hillfort of around 7 ha. of presumed Iron Age date, though no finds from this period have been recovered. At Lower Hazel, barely 1 km west, is another enclosure of 0.5 ha, plausibly identified as a banjo enclosure. Elberton Camp is a trapezoid-shaped enclosure 2.8 km north-west. Further away to the north-west is the Toot (5.6 km) at Oldbury on Severn, another small circular hillfort, bivallate on its eastern side, located next to the tidal pill. Limited excavations have taken place (Iles, 1980) and recovered some Iron Age pottery, but a more substantial investigation in 2017 found a further nine sherds of Iron Age pottery and included OSL dates for the bank construction of 10 BC  $\pm$ 90 and 60 BC  $\pm$ 70, making the site likely contemporary with Fishmonger's Swallet (Casswell, Forster and Wilkins, 2017: 17).

At the Roman conquest, this part of Gloucestershire was part of the tribal lands of the Dobunni, whose principal oppida lay to the north at Bagendon that may have served as the tribal capital and was certainly issuing coinage (Moore, 2007: 74-9), the distribution of which have been used to define the tribal area (Yeates 2008: 4). In this area of the Cotswolds, it seems that Romanisation took place rapidly, although late Iron Age coins continued to be deposited in early Roman contexts, and were produced from multiple centres (Moore, 2007: 79). There have been few accounts of Dobunnic religious practice, and mostly derived from evidence from the Roman period. Stephen Yeates' study (2008), while remaining controversial, does point to the central importance of natural places such as rivers, hills and forests in Iron Age religion, and while he does not mention caves and swallets it is easy to see how these might be included.

Fishmongers Swallet is not unique in the discovery of human remains in cave deposits although these are often not dated. However, the normal burial rite in the region is of crouched inhumations placed within small pits, either singularly or in small groups (Moore, 2007: 84-5). A late Iron Age 'cemetery' of 28 crouched inhumations has been reported from Henbury (Evans, *et al.* 2006) dating to the mid to late Iron Age. At Christon, south of Bristol, 13 crouched inhumations were found reusing earlier pits (Aston and Iles, 1987: 49). Human bones have also been found as disarticulated remains in ditches and pits from a wide range of local sites (Moore, 2007: 85) including from a late Bronze Age water hole at Shorncote (Brossler, *et al.* 2002: 44). However, the deposit of human remains at Fishmonger's Swallet remain exceptional for their quantity and the inclusion of such large quantities of animal bone.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://historicengland.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=d45dabecef5541f18255e12e5cd5f85a>

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