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Cover: Clinton Small at The Font, Ogof Ffynnon Du 1. Photo: Keith Jones.

Keith Jones, Editor.

The Quest for Merlin's Cave

'The Mystery of Merlin is a wandering spiralling path through the forest, a circling dance that suddenly pauses and changes direction, a descent into a lightless cave to find the stars'. (RJ Stewart 1991).

Any caver who has either caved or read widely, will have encountered Merlin's Cave in several locations. The writer for example has visited this seers cave in at least two sites, and knows of yet a further three sites. Such is the tradition of legends, and we will not have it any other way. One of Merlin's associates King Arthur for example is said to sleep in at least five caves in Wales alone.

Perhaps the connection between Merlin, and his cave can be traced back to 1136 when Geoffrey of Monmouth completed his: 'The History of the Kings of Britain'. In it Merlin suggested to King Vortigan why his fortress he was building was collapsing. Merlin told the King: 'My Lord King, summon your workmen. Order them to dig in the earth, and, underneath you will find a pool.' Merlin adds: 'Order the pool to be drained, and at the bottom you will observe two hollow stones. Inside the stones you will see two dragons which are sleeping'.

Legend suggests that Merlin hid treasure in a cave, at King Vortigan's city on Dinas Emrys. Local tradition near Snowdon states that he put the treasure into 'a large golden vessel, which together with his golden chair, he hid in a cave in the city, and then rolled a huge stone on to its mouth, covering the whole place over with earth and green turf so that no one could possibly find them'.

This legend continues: 'As the treasures in the cave by Llyn Ogwen are one lucky day to be possessed by an Irish shepherd lad, so Merlin's are to be the possession at some time or other of a "golden-haired and blue-eyed stripling," and "when he draws nigh to Dinas Emrys, a bell will ring to invite him into the cave, which will open out of its own accord as soon as his foot touches it.'

If indeed Merlin ever lived it must have been one and a half thousand years ago. Also from the historical view point he can only be linked to about two sites on the Welsh and Scottish boarder, yet almost every area has its mountains, trees, rocks, springs etc all connected to Merlin. So every people has its own Merlin which as scholars suggest is symbolic their psychic experiences in the best Shamanistic traditions. If this is the case, then a geographical search is missing the point. But a speleological search for his cave is another matter, we cavers are like Stewart writes: 'You may be one of those wild souls, like Merlin and the seers and seeresses in the old

Merlin tradition, who plunge straight into the cave, into the forest, not knowing what will come to pass'.

There are be parallels to be drawn between us cavers and Merlin's followers. They, (and we cavers?), search for their Holy Grail, (or place), while we search for our caves? Merlin's enlightenment, or Quest for the Holy Grail, so we are reliably informed, is to be found in wild places. We to search for the longest, and deepest, in some very wild places. Witness the search for the elusive yet close connection between Daren, and Agen Allwedd. God only knows when it connects, it will be well short of the longest in Britain, let alone the world. But when it happens, what of Craig y Ffynnon, and Llangyndir? the search will always continue! But Wales as we all know, has a long way to go to beat the proven potential in England. But do not despair, we have the deepest, and still the mystically, and potentially the longest. After all, we are in Merlin's country. There is also of course no wilder place than caves, for this reason alone then we are of the trail or quest for our Merlin.

There could be other links with the rapidly growing personal growth issues, and in this case, the men's movement. This movements attempts to discover the truths about masculinity that get beyond the stereotypes of our popular culture, in effects to grow up!

'A man must go on a quest
to discover the sacred fire
in the sanctuary of his own belly
to ignite the flame in his heart
to fuel the blaze in the hearth
to rekindle his ardour for the earth.'

So it goes on! the quest for Merlin's Cave, or the longest, or deepest will never be found, yet alone Smithy! Thus long live Merlin, long live the search, and long live the cave.

Caves like other sites connected with Merlin are very varied, locations include Wales, England, Scotland, Isle of Man, and Spain. Merlin is said to have turned the squire of Durandarte into the River Guadiana, which has its source in the Caves of Montersinos, in La Mancha. In Scotland St. Ninians Cave found on NX422361 near Glasserton is said in reality to be Merlin's. Although when approached along the beach, the entrance looks impressive, but it is now largely collapsed. Yet another Celtic shrine with links with him are the fissures at Spanish Head, on the Isle of Man. These are found at SC182658 near the village of Cregneish. England perhaps can no direct claim to Merlin has at least three sites. The extensive Roman chalk mines at Chislehurst TQ4470 being one example, while Alderley Edge is perhaps has more connections with King Arthur, but never-the-less is an intriguing site. Found near Macclesfield SJ8478., is another matter however. Arthur and his knights are said to sleep with treasure in the mines there, while the area contains

an over hanging rock, where water drips into a trough its base. On this rock is a carved face of an old Merlin, with an inscription: 'DRINK OF THIS AND TAKE THY FILL FOR THE WATER FALLS BY THE WIZARD'S WILL'.

There is one site in England which contains a Merlin's Cave, and this is the famous Tintegel in Cornwall, (SX048891). Tintegel is said to have reached the heart of the Merlin Mystery in Cornwall at least. Although the castle only dates back to the twelfth century, archaeology has revealed an earlier site, dated between AD450-650. North of the tourist village of Tintegel, with its Vale of Avalon, the path leads up or down, to the cove, waterfall, and Merlin's Cave. The cave is formed between a narrow limestone isthmus, and the Tintegel island. It is over 200 feet long, and about 20 feet high, and is open at both ends. It appears it has been formed along a fault line, and therefore will eventually collapse. It is said that King Arthur was born here, and was received by Merlin.

There is a Merlin's Cave on the Great Doward, Symonds Yat, and its neighbour King Arthur's Cave, has been previously investigated by the writer. The cave is found on the west bank of the Wye up stream of the Bibblins. Since this cave is situated on or near the 75 metre contour above the track, it may well be hidden from view by dense under growth over head during the summer months. The best plan is to walk up stream of the Bibblins for about 1300 metres, there are a number of paths striking up steeply from the path. Just after the first pinnacle above the track, take the next steep path, and climb up the the cliff face, to the impressive entrance to Merlin's Cave.

There are three entrances within the same alcove in the cliff face side by side, the largest and middle is Merlin's, but all require a four metre climb up the face, where a rather dubious rope has been left to aid the ascent. The two each side of the obvious Merlin's Cave are both shallow rock shelters about four metres long. The main cave is typical of the forest large entrance which ends abruptly after just 15.5 metres. The archaeological trench near the entrance was dug by UBSS who found a succession of final Pleistocene fauna, and that the limestone rubble is unstratified and sharp except where it has been transported by a stream. Furthermore, other artifacts were unearthed ranging from late Neolithic to Roman times.

But we know that this site was named 'Merlin's Cave' as recently as 1924 by Mr Hewer of UBSS. He writes in his report 'First Report on Excavations in the Wye Valley': 'The cave has hitherto been nameless, and it has been decided to call it "Merlin's Cave," on the analogy of the neighbouring "King Arthur's Cave." If there is a 'true' Merlin's Cave, then this is not it, so the search continues.

MERLIN'S CAVE.

Lord's Wood, Great Doward

NGR SO55651507.

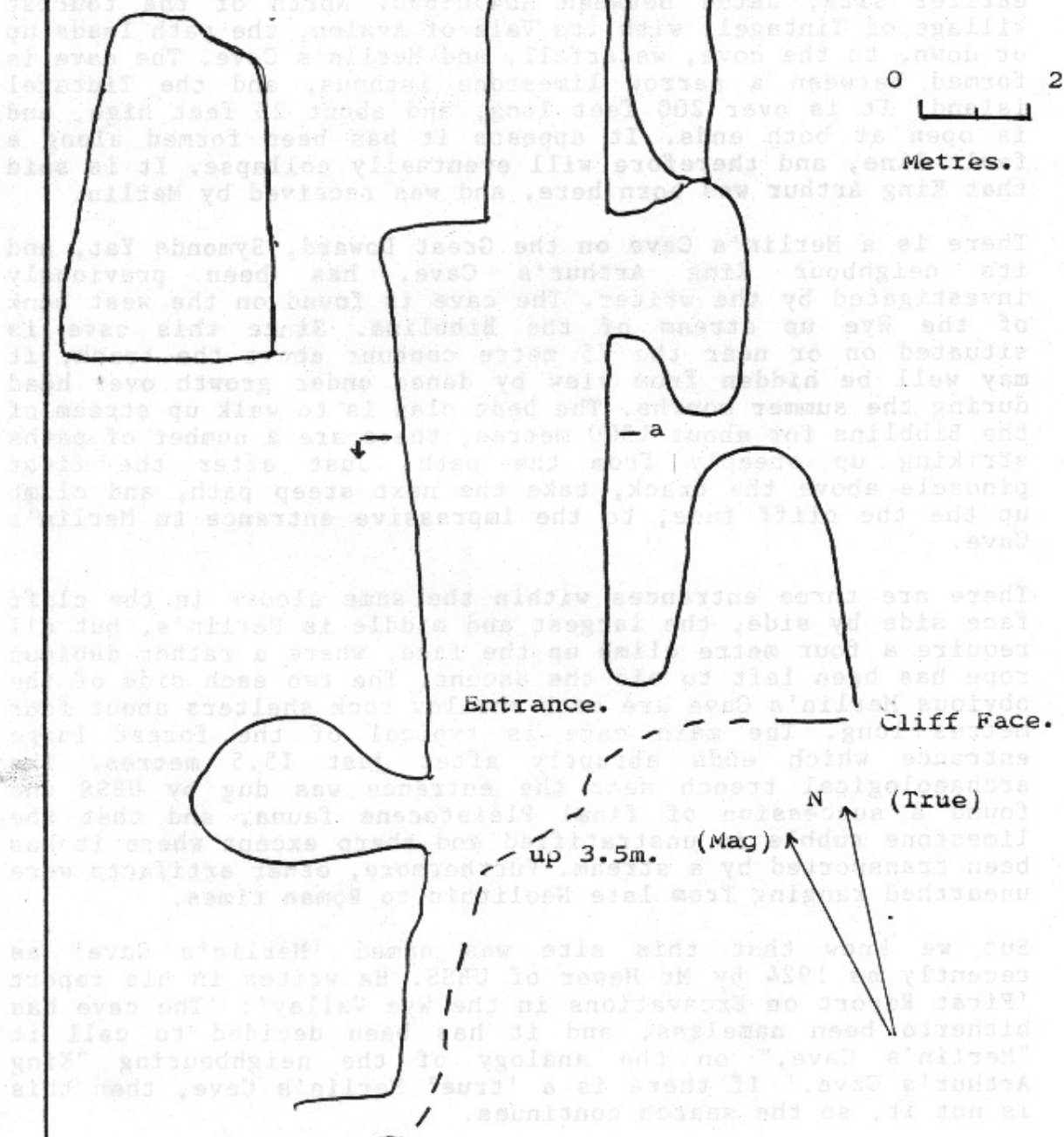
Altitude 63m.

Length 15.3m.

Based on Grade 5d.

Surveyed by UBSS 1924.

Surveyed by ICC 1992.



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There is however a significant connection between Merlin and the Doward. Merlin prophesied the collapse of the tyrant Vortigern, he took refuge in a natural stronghold Mount Cloartius (Little Doward). Then Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther lay siege, and eventually it was destroyed by fire, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Merlin: "Run from the fiery vengeance of the sons of Constantine". The source of this material was Geoffrey of Monmouth who clearly knew this area well, being just three miles from his home town.

There is said to be a cave with this name in Carmarthen. Merlin's Hill, Bryn Myrddin is found two and a half miles east, up the valley of the Afon Tywi. Local lore speaks of Merlin's Cave, and a hidden chamber under the hill where he is imprisoned, and his voice can be heard below the ground.

Edmund Spenser, in 'The Faerie Queene' (1596), gives a different account of the cave. He locates it in the grounds of Dynevor Castle near Llandeilo, quite a long way up the river, but warns us:

'And if thou ever happen that same way
To travel, go to see that dreadful place:
It is an hideous hollow cave (they say)
Under a rock that lies a little space
From the swift Barry, tumbling down apace,
Amongst the woody hills of Dynevowre;
But dare thou not, I charge, in any case.
To enter into that same baleful bower,
For fear the cruel fiends should thee unawares devour'.

Tony Oldham writes: 'The literature on Ogof Myddrin is quite extensive, but there is very little guide to its location, if it even exists. Another poem written by Caesar Morgan entitled 'The Cave of Merlin', may also give a clue to its location:

'Close by the vale, where Towy strays
And in his winding channel plays,
Where fair Carmarthen's Castle stands,
The ancient work of British hands;
A lofty mountain's shaggy side
Displays a cavern deep and wide.
Within, as fairy legends tell,
Merlin mutter'd many a spell'.

The AA Illustrated Guide to Britain page 308 places this cave "amongst the wooded hills around Llandeilo". Merlin's Hill NGR SN455215 is a likely spot except that it is said to lack even a rock shelter. There is positive evidence however that a cave of sort has been found on Merlin's Hill. In their book 'On the Trail of Merlin', Rich and Begg informs us: 'If you look up at Merlin's Hill from his stone, you will see three small houses facing you across the A40. To the right of the third, left hand one, look for some tall ash trees half way up the slope, which

will give you your line for seeking Merlin's spring and cave. It is a very steep and difficult scramble, to the right of the garden belonging to the last house, through almost impassable forest, but if you persist you may find, depending on recent rainfall, a green patch of watercress and the hint of a spring. Most of the water has now been syphoned off for farm use, but remnants of a cave-like formation can still be seen. If you follow the line up, it is said, you will come across, with luck, a more likely candidate for the title Crystal Cave, but at midsummer the undergrowth made further exploration impossible.'

Ward Lock's guide puts the cave as "close to a waterfall at the foot of Daren Hill (NGR SN535292). Ioan Richards visiting Daren Hill (April 1975), he writes: 'and interviewed a number of farmers, but the common reply was "Never heard of Merlin's Cave". However, one farmer could recall, as a child, being taught by a now deceased headmaster who was fond of reciting stories of Merlin's Cave in the rocks of Daren Hill. They searched amongst the rocks as children and failed to find the cave- apart from rock shelters. Eventually Ioan Richards interviewed the oldest inhabitant 86 year old Mr Rees who keeps Brechfa Post Office and also a real tailor's shop, making suits as well as running the Post Office. Mr Rees confirmed that there had been speculation about Merlin's Cave in the area but that no-one had ever found it. However, he says that there is definitely a cave of sorts at the upper reaches of the River Afon Pib. He recalls visiting this as a young man. It is situated near a waterfall, and a very approximate NGR is SN485320. Mr Rees is sure that this is Merlin's Cave, and during the last centaury was even inhabited by a sheep rustler known as Twm Helwr (Tom the Hunter).

Even Issac states that Owain Llawgoch (Owen the Red Hand) was one of the most romantic figures in Wales in the Middle Ages and sometimes he takes the place of King Arthur in the story of the cave. Isaac records that Owain and his brave men are in Ogof Myrddin, asleep under Merlin's spell. When the day comes they will awake with unusual strength and vigour and reclaim Britain for the Celts'. This was added also in Barber's book, 'Mysterious Wales'.

This location is duplicated in a recent book written by Deike Rich and Ean Begg (1991), who also give us more details. They give the NGR as SN485320, and suggest there are the remains of a collapsed cave found in the east bank of the waterfall, and suggest that '...dangerously steep slopes and rocks that lead to what was once the cave'. Rich and Begg doubtless gained this location from Barber's 'Mysterious Wales' published in 1982. This chain suggests that this location has its roots in Tony Oldham's book, which was published during 1975.

There is yet another Merlin's Cave near Tenby, Dyfed. From several contemporary sources from the last centaury its

location is given as on the South Sands. Mason during 1867 gives a clue as to its location: 'Above the cavern is a very good specimen of a raised beach'. Tony Oldham using this and other pieces of evidence suggests: 'I had difficulty in locating this cave as there are two caves on the South Sands. Using the engraving in Mason's I would plump for the northern cave as Merlin's. It pieces a rocky projection and is about 20 yards long from each entrance. A portion of raised beach is visible in the roof. The other cave is about 100 yards to the south, consists of a cul-de-sac about 30 feet long with passage dimensions of about 15 feet high by 10 feet wide. The strata is very nearly vertical at this point'.

During their journey around South Wales, the Wye, and the coast, the Halls' wrote of the cave: 'On this side there are several caverns of various shapes and sizes; one not far from the town, and known as Merlin's Cave, is much admired. We visited it just after the retreating tide has smoothed the fine sand that forms the flooring, and felt it to be a cool and agreeable retreat from the heat outside. What connection it has with the bard and prophet whose name it bears is to us unknown, but the place, from its solitariness and seclusion- from the interior nothing to be seen but the sea and Caldy bounding the horizon- would certainly offer a satisfactory refuge from the pains and fears of worldly-mindedness. It is of large size, and is seen to best advantage at noon-day. The top, thickly patched with the *Asplenium marinum*, is composed of immense masses of stone, which seem so insecure as to make us wonder they do not fall every moment; and the sharp and angular sides present the appearance of polished red and green marble, shot with veins of white, caused by the constant dripping of water from above'.

The writer suggests that the locations given as SN13600030 may not be correct. In the first instance the Halls tell us that the cave has fine views of Caldy, not the case with this location. Furthermore, the OS 1:25,000 series map clearly marks 'Merlin's Cave', as on SN13180011.

The location of this cave at Tenby then is very unclear. Its location given in four accounts conflict. The cliffs of the South Beach does contain ten caves. If however we examine the evidence chronologically the site may narrow considerably, because various writers often change older facts.

The Halls appear to be the earliest account, and has a nice drawing to accompany their material. Next we have 'Mason's Guide to Tenby' published three after the Halls in 1870. 'In Merlin's Cave, near the Steamill, grows the *Asplenium Marinum* (Marine Spleenwort). Above the cavern is a very good specimen of raised beach.' Mason also adds: 'The top, thickly patched with the *Asplenium Marinum*, is composed of immense masses of stone which seems so insecure as to make us wonder they do not fall every moment; and the sharp and angular sides present the

appearance of polished red and green marble, shot with veins of white, caused by the constant dripping of water from above.'

There is yet another description in 'A Pictorial Descriptive Guide to Tenby, Pembroke, Carmarthen, and South Wales', published in 1933: 'The Merlin Walk, leading down to the South Sands, bears the name of a large cave over which it passes, and against the entrance to which it ends, but in recent years the cave has almost filled with sand, so that the opening is hardly visible'. Finally we have Tony Oldham account in 1979, and suggests the NGR is SN13600030, while an OS map published during 1974 gives it as SN13180011. There is indeed a cave of sorts at this latter location. But at only three metres long this fades into insignificance when we consider the others candidates.

The engraving given in the Halls' book fits the cave at SN13590029 Cave B, next to Tony's cave. Also the plant growth, rock formation all fits, and yes there is a portion of raised beach not forming the roof in Tony's cave, but in this case, 'above the cavern'. Also from the entrance there are indeed fine views of Caldy. Finally, the cliff above the cave, is very unstable and it has to be said all other candidates fits this site.

Tony's cave, Cave A, has two entrances, the one faces Castle Hill, while the other to the south-west does hold fine views of Caldy. Further, this cave does contain 'immense masses of stone'.

The final account published during 1933, suggests that the 'cave has almost filled with sand'. There is one site that fits this description, Cave C, and this is the longest in the area, but still only 29 metres. This cave contains a double entrance, and the deeper recesses are almost buried in the sand.

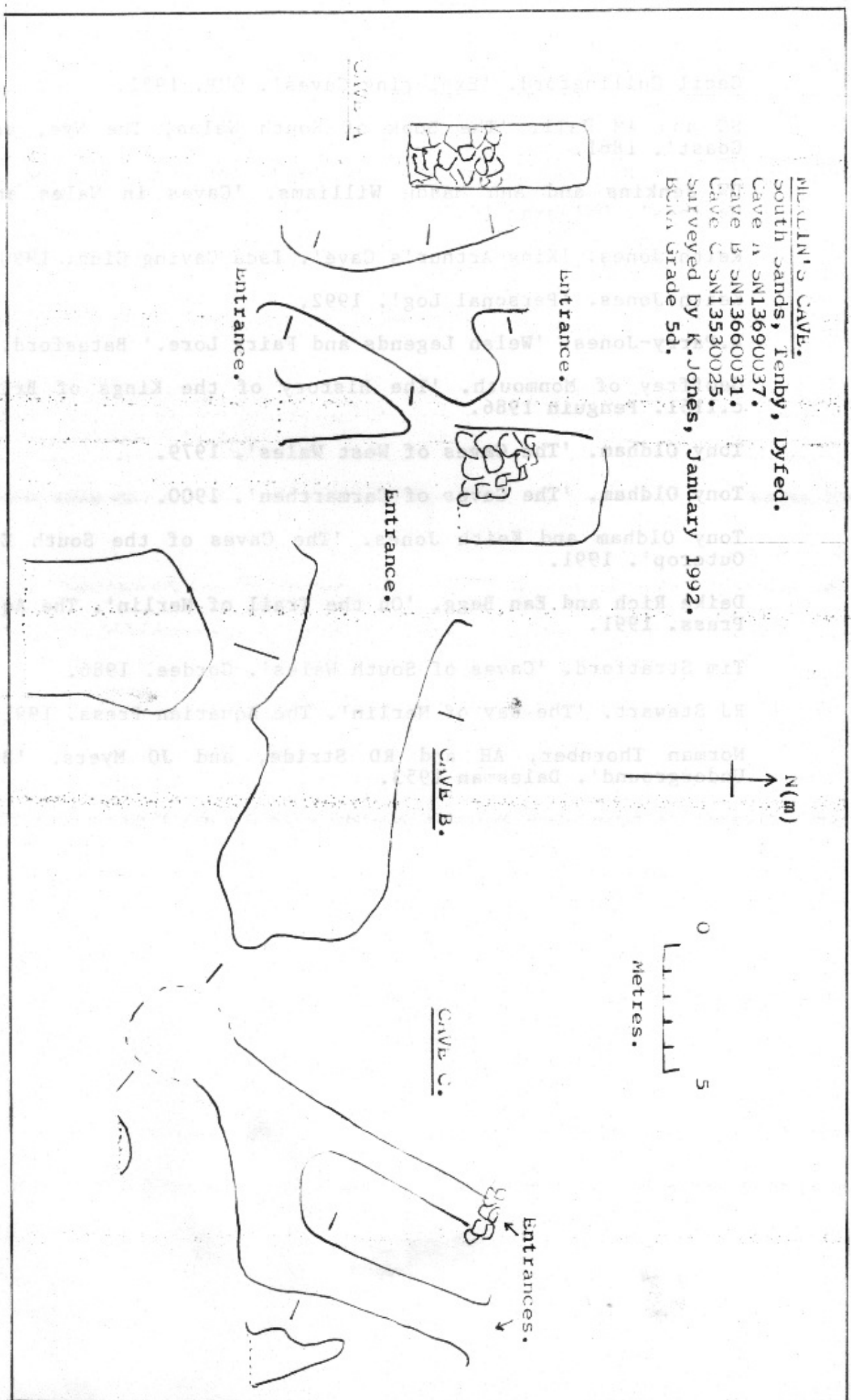
Therefore I suggest that one of these three caves is Merlin's. I suspect Cave C being the most recently described has been ascribed to Merlin as it is the longest in the area. Has it is the most recently outlined and based on existing material is perhaps the most inaccurate location. Finally Caves A and B both very close seem to tie, but I sensed a 'presence' in Cave B, and as the Merlin traditionalists suggest we must seek our own 'Sacred space', this then is MY Merlin's Cave. And since caves are where you find them, others would find their Merlin's Cave in their locations, and pinning it down to any one location is missing the point.

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MILLIN'S CAVE.
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 Cave C SN13530025.
 Surveyed by K. Jones, January 1992.
 Bona Grade 5d.



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