

A BRIEF LOOK AT TWO ENGLISH “CAVES”

- Kent Henderson

During a recent trip to England, I visited two interesting man-made caves, those at Chislehurst and Royston. Both were dug from chalk, but that is where their similarity ends.

Arguably more mine than cave, Chislehurst Caves are located in the County of Kent, about 25 minutes south-east from central London by train. The caverns total twenty-two miles of excavated passages, reputedly dating back over 8,000 years. On-site archaeology has confirmed stone-age and Roman usage. During WWII the caves were converted into Britain's biggest public air raid shelter, and they housed, on occasions, up to 15,000 people. Privately managed, they are open to the public daily. A relatively small section is toured. A number of displays are dotted at various points, depicting supposed roman, druidic, and WWII habitation. There is an “obligatory” underground chapel, the remnants of a WWII hospital, and underground toilets, amongst other tourist delights.

The infrastructure in the cave is poor, with 240v cable and the odd light globe strung through the passageways. The displays are, for the most part, pretty unsatisfactory. The interpretation of the guide I experienced was, similarly, ordinary. One had the distinct impression that he'd done his spiel on many occasions previously, as undoubtedly was the case. Much more could be made of the history of the caves than was imparted. The only “updated” feature of the site is the Visitor's Centre, which is modern, albeit full of fast food

and kitsch, although containing some historical displays of interest. In short, if one where in London and had nothing else to do, a visit to Chislehurst Caves would kill half a day.

The other cave visited was much more interesting. Royston Cave is located under the centre of the market town of the same name in Hertfordshire, to the north-east of London. It is a single, bell-shaped chamber hewn from chalk. As far as is known this cave is unique in Britain, if not the world. Its origin is unknown, but the carvings on the walls are clearly mediaeval and most of them have religious significance. The circular cave, rediscovered in 1742, supports the theory that the Knights Templar, before their proscription by the Pope in the 14th century, may have used it, but such theories remain speculative. It is basically only open to the public on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, whereupon local historical society members conduct tours. And fascinating it is. The whole circular lower walls are mysteriously carved. In terms of management, the infrastructure is excellent, with a stairway descending to a modern circumferential octagonal podium, constructed of wood at the bottom, supporting a good interpretative display case. My guide was enthusiastic, and displayed a great deal of knowledge. There was no time limit on the tour, which ran to the extent of the questions asked by visitors and the answers given (invariably at length!). In short, it was well worth the trip and the few pounds entry fee.