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# ‘The Land to Forget Time’: Tourism, Caving and Writing in the Derbyshire White Peak

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the relationship between three cultural practices which engage with the subterranean limestone landscapes of the Derbyshire White Peak: showcave tourism, sport caving and literary landscape writing. It suggests that modern tourism and caving perform and represent the Peak 'underland' in distinctive but interrelated ways which have deep roots in the tourism of the past, as a landscape which is both wonderful and ordinary, solitary and sociable, ancient and everyday, and examines some contemporary landscape writing which draws on both representational conventions. The article argues that the White Peak landscape should be understood as a 'vertical' geography which is both physically and culturally multilayered, and suggests that this layeredness can become flattened in geographies which focus on the surface landscape and aim to capture a unified sense of place.*

## KEY WORDS

Vertical, Cave, Macfarlane, Tourism, Sublime

## Introduction

The Visit Peak District poster outside Manchester Piccadilly train station is titled 'The Land to Forget Time'. Featuring a montage of activities, events and attractions available in the Peak District National Park (PDNP) and Derbyshire, with crowded pop festivals and country house visits framing solo walks and climbs, the website for the campaign invites the commuters rushing busily by to explore 'a world away, that's not far away' (See Figure 1; see <http://thelandtoforgettime.co.uk/>). The latest (2014) Park Authority survey of visitors to the Peak District National Park suggests that the poster is addressing the right audience, and confirms the 'not far away' aspect of its claim. The survey found that 79% of its sample were day visitors, with an average stay of 3.4 hours, and that around two thirds were 'regular, repeat visitors', living within easy reach of the Park. With at least 10 million visitors per annum and roughly half the population of England and Wales living within 60 miles of its borders (see <http://www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/learning-about/news/mediacentrefacts>), the Peak District is the UK's rural day-trip destination par excellence.



Figure 1. Visit Peak District and Derbyshire, 'The Land to Forget Time',

<http://thelandtoforgettime.co.uk/>.

The status of the Peak as a tourist destination has a remarkably long history. 'Peaktown' was listed amongst the four 'wonders' of post-conquest England in twelfth-century annals, and in the fourteenth century, Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* ranked Peak Cavern, beneath the Norman Peveril castle in present-day Castleton, first amongst these wonders (see Shimwell, 1980, pp. 19-20). By the seventeenth century, though it was still one of England's most inaccessible regions and had only rudimentary roads, the Peak was on the map for curious travelers. The antiquarian William Camden's *Britannia* (1586) mentioned nine 'wonders' of the Peak, though he considered only three of them noteworthy; Michael Drayton's topographic poem *Poly-Olbion* (1622) described seven wonders, featuring them on an accompanying map. When the philosopher Thomas Hobbes took a tour from Chatsworth house in 1627 with his young patron William Cavendish to see the wilder parts of Cavendish's Derbyshire estate, he found the ground at one site strewn with the litter of previous visitors (Hobbes, 1678, p. 60). The poem which Hobbes wrote about this tour, *Song of the Wonders of the Peak*, only served to enhance the region's popularity, and promoted its own canon of seven Wonders: Chatsworth House, Peak Cavern, Mam Tor (a hill), Eldon Hole (a deep pothole), St. Anne's

Well at Buxton, Poole's Cavern, and Weedon Well, a spring in Tideswell that produced water and then sucked it down again.

By no means everyone who followed Hobbes agreed on the significance of every element of the wonder canon, some agreeing with Daniel Defoe's (2001) judgement, a century later, that these were, on the whole, 'wonderless wonders' (v. 3, p. 48), and indeed the debate over what, if anything, is distinctive and valuable in this landscape has itself become one of its defining characteristics. Perhaps the very accessibility of the Peak, the brevity of casual visits, and the multitude and range of visitors, has made patterns of use difficult to track and understand, and contributed to uncertainty about the nature of this landscape's distinctiveness and value, as perceived by those who visit and promote it. Despite the longevity of Peak tourism and Peak topographical writing, and despite its continued popularity as a leisure destination, it's possible to regard the Peak District's cultural identity as 'yet to be confirmed, recognised by the community and clearly articulated' (Crouch et al, 2009, p. 182). But it's also possible to view this lack of resolution, as I will here, more positively, and to treat the Peak's cultural identity as plural, or multilayered. We can see this tendency towards plurality in the representational heritage which leads from Drayton's and Hobbes's eclectic rag-bag of Wonders, to the tourist montage of today. The central claim of the tourist poster reinforces what I will argue here is an important aspect of this plural cultural identity. It offers escape 'from the 9 to 5; the hustle and bustle' to an audience who along with thousands of others will cram their brief visit to the Peak –for a dog walk, cycle ride or climb- into a few hours at the end of a working day, or at most, a weekend daytrip to traffic-jam-locked Bakewell, Chatsworth or Matlock. The escape from ordinary time (the 9 to 5) and other people (the hustle and bustle) is mostly illusory, and yet, along with the busy, sociable reality of the daytrip Peak, it's an essential element of that plural cultural identity and sense of place that continues to provide an irresistible draw.

This article will trace these themes of time and sociability in the plural cultural identity of the Peak as they play out in engagements with one of its most distinctive landscape features: the caves of the limestone area now known as the White Peak. It will look at the way in which two distinct cultural practices, cave tourism and the sport of caving, engage with this underground landscape, defining its cultural meaning and value in contrasting, yet overlapping ways, and at the way in which literary writing on underground landscapes draws upon the representational languages of these cultural practices, reproducing their meanings and values. It will suggest that the 'vertical' geography of the Peak is both an example of and a striking metaphor for its layered cultural identity.

## What is an Underground Landscape?

What does it mean to talk about an underground landscape? John Wylie characterises the 'common or customary' understanding of landscape as a 'portion of land or scenery' which can be encompassed by the eye at one go, and which can be 'surveyed, mapped and described in a factual and objective manner' (2007: 6). He traces successive theoretical complications of this common understanding, within which landscape features variously as something shaped by human action; something ideologically imposed; something which hides power relations and labour; something imagined; something felt; something performed; and something defined in law. Most of these theorisations remain in a state of play in current writing, so any attempt to write about landscape has to begin by defining the object to be studied and the methodology that will be used to study it. Indeed, the field of landscape studies is a little like the Peak landscape: polymorphous, or multilayered.

Underground landscapes, such as the cave systems of the Derbyshire Peak, are an interesting test case for ideas about landscape. At first glance, they pose a particular challenge to common and older theoretical understandings. Most cave systems can only be encompassed by the eye partially at best and hence scarcely fit the customary understanding. The suppression of the visual underground –the capacity for a perspective, or overview- is attended by a suppression of the

local -the ability to perceive distinctive features of place- and the temporal. In the case of caves, the time of human history, as registered in the distinctive architectural and agricultural features of a surface landscape, is largely replaced by geological time: the action of water on stone. This can mean the elision of underground landscapes in geographies grounded on older theoretical models.

The 'Berkeley School' of human geography founded in the 1920s by Carl Sauer defines landscape as nature intertwined with and shaped by human culture, and seeks methodologically to characterise its distinctive products. The enduring influence of this approach is evident in the contemporary UK programme of Landscape Character Assessments. LCAs respond to the 2007 European Landscape Convention's injunction that signatories integrate landscape within law and policy by seeking to identify, assess and set objectives for all landscapes (Peak District National Park Authority and Countryside, 2009, p. 6). The Peak District LCA, completed in 2008, defines landscape as 'more than just 'the view' (p. 9). It is about 'the relationship between people, place and nature. It is the ever-changing backdrop to our daily lives' (p. 9). The LCA characterises a set of eight Landscape Character Areas within and surrounding the Peak District National Park in terms of their characteristic natural form ('geology, landform, river and drainage systems, soils and vegetation cover'), their wildlife, their historic uses and the physical legacy these have left behind, their current uses and occasionally their 'sense of place', as recorded by a geographer in the field (p. 6). Historic lead mines and quarries feature in the document a number of times as a distinctive product of the relationship between human culture and physical nature in the Peak, as a habitat for bats and metal-tolerant plants, and therefore as features with value, worthy of preservation and management. The word cave, however, in a 212-page document devoted to one of the UK's most famous limestone landscapes, features just three times: all within a two-page description of the White Peak's geology and ecology (pp. 21-22). The famous show caves at Castleton, prime destinations for tourists, and the mighty Titan, the UK's biggest limestone shaft, first discovered in 1998, are not mentioned at all, though the superficial landscape beneath which they sit is described and categorised in some detail. The Peak District LCA is regarded as an example of work at the cutting edge of the discipline, and it's an exceptionally rich resource (see Warnock and Griffiths, 2015). It's simply that the discipline of Landscape Character Assessment itself allows the geographer not to 'see' these natural underground landscapes, despite their cultural significance and value.<sup>1</sup> The result is a partial flattening of both physical and cultural layeredness and depth.

Dominant and customary modes of geographic representation, then, tend to leave the underground Peak landscape, as the writer Robert Macfarlane (2013) has observed, a 'data-depleted' realm (p. 53). The famous caves of Castleton are even missing from the Visit Peak District tourist poster, though their subterranean presence appears to haunt the forms of covered pop festival stages and holiday cabins. However Wylie's (2007) map of landscape theory offers orientations which counter this tendency towards invisibility. Critics of Sauerian geography have sought to move beyond its presentation of culture and landscape as ready-formed entities to be captured and defined, and to focus instead on the processes through which landscapes are constructed, performed, struggled over and defined in law (p. 102). Cultural geographies since the 1980s have been influenced by ideas about the ideological construction of landscape aesthetics emerging from literary theory, but recent scholarship has sought to correct the privilege this accords to representation over lived experience, responding to the phenomenological insistence on the embodied nature of experience, and producing ethnographies of the ordinary, embodied cultural practices which 'perform' landscape such as dog-walking and cycling. Recent work in political geography and urban studies has drawn attention to the vertical and layered nature of constructed and performed space in high-rise cityscapes framed by excavated and airborne infrastructure (see Harris, 2015).

These newer turns make ample room for subterranean space. Underland, as Macfarlane calls the subterranean world, is rich food for phenomenology and the literary imagination. It is the visceral abject; the ur-house; the undiscovered parallel world of Virgil's, Verne's and Tolkien's fictions, shaped -like Mars, because of its inaccessibility- more by artistic creation than by



experience (see Crane & Fletcher, 2015). The experience of going underground, with its sensory foregrounding of the sense of touch, is inevitably one of *involvement*, or *immersion* in the experience of the body, rather than intellectual distancing, through the visual mediation of the overview (see Heap, 1964, pp. 6-7). More obviously than in the superficial experience of landscape, the subterranean experience is one of reversibility, where the body is both subject and object (Wylie, p. 151). Moreover Underland has its own distinctive set of performative cultural practices to be characterised, from the long tradition of cave tourism to the shorter one of sport caving. And perhaps most tellingly of all, caves and mines are the original 'volumetric' spatialities (Harris, 603), precursors in the spatial imaginary to the inorganic, multilayered geographies of the post-industrial city (see Williams, 4). They demand the same recognition as physical and cultural landscapes that is now being given to vertical urban space.

This article does not hold to a hard and fast distinction between representational and non-representational engagements with landscape. Like walking, climbing or caving, writing is itself a performance, sometimes undertaken individually; sometimes as part of a group. As the climber, runner and poet Helen Mort puts it, poetry is 'a set of instructions for the voice', just as a climbing manual is for the body (Evans and Mort, <https://soundcloud.com/7-wonders>). Like the body from which it proceeds, writing is reversible; both representational and represented, as acts of writing landscape are reproduced in further landscapings. Moreover the writing I study is often the product of a deep commitment to the embodied experience of landscape, and just as ethnographies of embodied practices are inevitably recorded in words, landscape writing often focuses consciously and deliberately on the points at which embodied experience tumbles into language and back again, and the way in which experiences push at the bounds of the conventional, the ideological, the already-written. Just as cavers dream of spaces unseen by any previous human eye, phenomenology can only dream of an experience which precedes language and history. As Mitch Rose (2006) suggests, an experience of landscape unmediated by culture and language is best understood as a 'dream of presence' in which all of us with an investment in it participate –from planners, to tourists, to cavers, to poets. In the case of those negative volumes which are caves, we might playfully reconfigure this as a 'dream of absence'.

### **Does it matter where you are?**

In a special issue dedicated to the Derbyshire Peak, it's worth asking whether that local designation –of place-ness- has any meaning when applied to spaces whose characteristics are largely independent of features above ground. Using the term for characteristic limestone scenery derived from the limestone plateau north of Trieste, Robert Macfarlane (2013) has described the cave systems of the Derbyshire Peak as part of 'an archipelago of karst landscapes, spread across the world' (p. 46). Sport cavers think of themselves as part of a global community, and whilst their ordinary, weekend trips may be taken in their own backyards, they save for and swap tales about the big ones –to Mexico or China. I've already spoken of the way in which underground landscapes suppress established perceptions of the local, and just as it's a challenge to orient yourself underground, most of the conventional markers of a superficial 'sense of place' are missing. In some respects, a cave system in the White Peak has more in common with one in Mexico than it does with the surface landscape above it.

But where landscape is about more than the Sauerian categories of geology, biology and architectural and agricultural legacy, there is plenty to mark the Peak District Underland as a distinctive landscape. It is distinctive in terms of those categories which new theories of landscape have opened up. The underground networks of the White Peak are not simply 'given' landscapes, but are often, in part, the product of landscape-ings. Centuries of workings by lead-miners working on scales from the individual to the industrial have riddled this landscape, extending or intersecting natural cave systems with mines themselves and the 'soughs' or drainage channels which lower water tables in order to make mining possible. The history through which this landscape was made is

one of conflict and struggle –between rival mining interests, and between miners and landowners (see Wood, 1999). Although lead mining petered out in the 1920s and 30s, this conflict over mineral extraction in the Peak has been translated above-ground, in the still-fraught issue of limestone quarrying –a source of local employment, but for planners and tourists an aesthetic blight on the landscape. For cavers, perhaps more than for any other group engaging with superficial landscapes, Underland is not simply a ‘backdrop’; it’s a space to be created. Cavers will work for months and sometimes years to clear blocked passageways of mud and rubble and to create, or re-create systems which no previous caver has experienced.

If the social history of the Peak has conditioned both distinctive landscaping processes and a distinctive landscape product, the cultural practices through which its underground landscapes have been and continue to be ‘performed’, both physically and in cultural discourse, are equally distinctive. My purpose here is to characterise these performances, to explore their relationship to one another, and to describe the way they produce and reproduce a plural, or multilayered sense of time and place.

### Cave Tourism

Whilst its penetration of caves systems themselves and of cave knowledge is more superficial, cave tourism has a far longer history in the Derbyshire Peak than the sport of caving. This history is recorded in a literary canon which begins in earnest in the seventeenth century with Thomas Hobbes, and with the poet, translator and fly fisherman Charles Cotton. Cotton published his *Wonders of the Peake* in 1681, which in turn traded on the popularity of Hobbes’s *De Mirabilius Pecci Carmen*, published in Latin in 1636, and in translation in 1678. In the writing of Hobbes and Cotton, as Jess Edwards (2012) has described, responses to the subterranean karst of the White Peak flicker between a proto-sublime fear and wonder, scientific rationalism, and a sense of anti-climax, or bathos, associated both with the uncouth landscape itself, whose lumps and holes are often crudely anthropomorphised, with the ‘boorish’ locals who facilitate its tourist trade, and with the cruder pleasures and amusements available to elite travellers slumming it on the road. The identity of these elite travellers is carved out in terms of their appreciation of the landscape’s intrinsic ‘wonderfulness’; their capacity to encompass this wonderfulness rationally through measurement, experiment and explanation; and finally their sophisticated capacity to bring this wonderful landscape, its inhabitants and themselves satirically down to earth. I suggest that whilst the cultures of landscape performance change over the next three centuries, this matrix of elements tends to persist.

Writing and painting after Hobbes and Cotton, and until the late eighteenth century, consistently registers the sociality of a tourist visit to Peak Cavern. Tourists came, like Hobbes, as members of often boisterous parties, and encountered ‘native’ ropemakers who lived and worked in the cave, on whom they were obliged to depend in exploring it (see Figure 2). It’s only as the sublime aesthetic takes hold that these human figures drain away, in some instances, from cultural representation (see Figure 3).





Figure 2. Isaac Cruikshank, 'View in Peak Hole after passing the first river', 1797.



Figure 3. George Cumberland, *Inside the Peak Cavern, Castleton, Derbyshire*, ca. 1820.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in editions of 1757 and 1759, Edmund Burke distinguished, as Rosalind Williams has described, between the 'weak' emotion of aesthetic pleasure derived from perception of the qualities of beauty ('smallness, smoothness, delicacy, variation, and color'), and the 'strong' emotion, ambivalent between fear of genuine danger and secure admiration, derived from experiencing the sublime (Williams, p. 86). The aesthetic qualities of sublimity, as defined by Burke, include vastness, solitude, obscurity and vacuity, and the Peak District's caves were increasingly consumed and represented by tourists and artists influenced by Burke's thesis, suggests Williams, as 'ideal examples of sublimity in nature' (pp. 86-7). The paradox in this impulse is that as the Peak became increasingly well established as a destination for aesthetic tourism, and the showcave developed into an 'enchanted illuminated underworld' (Williams, p. 107), the experience of a genuinely sublime experience (of solitude, darkness, danger) became increasingly hard to obtain.

Already well-trodden even in Hobbes and Cotton's day, the tourist trail taking in the Derbyshire caves must have felt distinctly commonplace to a traveller in the 1790s, when James Plumptre (1992) wrote his journal accounts of British travels. Plumptre visited the Peak in August 1793, taking in six of the seven Peak Wonders visited by Hobbes and Cotton. Plumptre is enthusiastic in his account of a landscape which he identifies in Burkean terms as sublime. But his experience of this sublimity is periodically spoiled by Plumptre's fellow travellers. Arriving at the entry to Peak Cavern in the hillside beneath Peveril Castle, he finds that 'its near situation to so dreadful a precipice fills the mind with terror' (p. 129). Inside the cave, after making their arrangements with the ropemakers who will guide them, Plumptre's party passes through 'the Devil's cellar, where it is customary for those who are fond of drinking, to drink what they have brought with them', and whose walls 'are entirely scrawled over with the names of those who have been so *devilish jolly* here' (p. 132). Moving further in, they are disturbed by the 'hooping and hollowing' of a party from Buxton, which 'took off much from the horror and solemnity of the scene' (p. 132). 'The effect', Plumptre reflects, ruefully, must be more grand with only a few' (p. 132). After this trip to Peak

Cavern, Plumptre was encouraged by his guide (much as a double ticket deal encourages the modern visitor) to visit nearby Speedwell Mine. Operative from 1771 to around 1790, and now itself part of the Castleton tourist experience, Speedwell had already begun its long life as a tourist attraction. This trip was much more successful and filled Plumptre's party with 'the mixed emotions of terror and admiration' (p. 138).

What's significant in Plumptre's account, when compared to its seventeenth-century predecessors, is that although the same basic ingredients are there –the sublimity of extraordinary experience and the bathos of the ordinary- the boundary between the two is no longer the boundary between the elite traveller and the uncouth native, or even between two sides of the traveller's own nature. Now what marks out the value of his experience for Plumptre is the boundary between the common tourist and the more intrepid and serious traveller in search of the sublime. Plumptre articulates in his account much of the ethos of modern sport caving, and indeed his account inspired and informed one of Peak District caving's defining achievements: the discovery by Peak District caver Dave Nixon, on New Year's Day 1999, of the Peak Cavern system's Titan.<sup>ii</sup>

## Caving

Sarah Cant (2003) locates the emergence of sport caving at the end of the nineteenth century, alongside 'mountaineering, climbing and rambling', within a broader Victorian 'sphere of adventure, heroic masculinities and exploration' (pp. 69-70). But, as the French mountaineer and caver Edouard Martel wrote in 1896, whilst

"many persons complain that European mountains are exhausted, so far as exercise and sport are concerned, let them change this wish to ascend to a wish to descend, and many years will elapse before they have exhausted their own 'dark playground' of Great Britain."  
(cited in Cant, 2006, p. 70)

Martel's call for the British to pursue the 'sporting-science' of what had recently been christened 'speleology', was taken up formally thirty years later when, in 1935, a group of 'cave explorers, scientists, university professors and museum curators' met at the City Museum, Derby (Cant, 2006, p. 776, p. 781).

The culture of modern caving, as performed in specialist magazines and club newsletters is consciously indebted to these historical roots, and perpetuates a Victorian fusion of adventure and scientific inquiry. The principal focus of *Descent*, a bi-monthly caving magazine in print since 1969, is caving news from the main UK and international karst regions, reported by local correspondents including, until his death in 2015, the Peak's John Beck. But it also prints historic accounts of caving trips and frequent 'vale' features marking the passing of influential figures from previous generations. This situation in a web of relationships and a succession of past discoveries and achievements is one of the ways in which the local and national cultures of caving identify themselves. Another is through the shared heritage of caving's distinctive sport-scientific language.

The unique features of subterranean karst landscapes have, of course, their own terminology, inherently strange to those outside the culture of caving, but commonplace to those within it. Along with the mineralogical terminology ('flowstone', 'speleothems') used to describe the often hauntingly beautiful results of acidified water eroding limestone, there is a distinctive lexicon to represent both the results of human action underground, and the receptiveness or otherwise of the underground landscape to the action of the sporting caver. 'Pitches' are vertical sections of cave passage climbed using rope or ladder; 'ducks', sections where the caver has to dip their head close to or briefly beneath the water to continue; 'sumps', sections of passage filled to the roof with water so that they have to be dived; 'chokes', boulder blockages that have to be cleared (See <http://ukcaving.com/wiki/index.php/Glossary>). When a caver digs a depression in the surface or clears a 'shakehole' to find a passage underneath, the newly discovered cave is said to 'go'.



Speaking this language –part technical, part scientific, part tribal- marks inclusion within the caving community. But it also marks a bridge to other, less rigorous engagements with subterranea. Essential to the linguistic culture of caving is the act of ‘naming’. Like climbers, and like all discoverers and explorers, cavers ‘take possession’ of their conquests through detailed acts of surveying, mapping, and –most immediately- naming. And as with other acts of discovery and exploration, whilst surveying and mapping represent the presence of the abstract authority of science underground; naming expresses the identity, the personality and the experience of the caver. These names sometimes attempt to capture the sublime grandeur of a mighty cave, as where Leviathan leads to Titan in the Peak Cavern system, but more often are ‘bathetic’, expressing a shared, rueful humour at the physical reality of moving through mud, water and tight squeezes, as in the Peak Cavern’s ‘Mucky Ducks’, or some cave exploring team’s shared joke, such as Fawlty Towers and Poetic Licence in the same system. There’s a continuity here with the tourist tradition and practice which has for centuries shown off the dripping chamber known as ‘Roger Rain’s House’, or the bell-like roof formation christened ‘Great Tom of Lincoln’ as part of the showcave tour. These acts of naming shine the light of ordinary human life and experience on the frighteningly dark and timeless subterranean world, and the culture of caving, with the characteristic ambivalence of the sublime, tends to keep the horrors of deep time and space at bay by anchoring itself in the everyday.

The flickering of naming in caving culture between sublimity and bathos is in tune with a tension which Sarah Cant (2003) identifies in cave writing –between the 19<sup>th</sup>-century masculinist explorer paradigm, involving the domination of a feminised nature by the distanced and objectifying scientific gaze, and the peculiarly immersive physical experience of caving, which, she argues, undercuts this paradigm. The physical nature of the subterranean landscape, Cant suggests, enforces a kind of embodied subjectivity which is vulnerable, un-heroic, and –we might say- prone to bathos, undercutting the hard objectivity of science (p. 72). Caving, she argues, conditions a form of memory and representation in which the body remains peculiarly present (pp. 73-4). In fact, much cave writing positively glories in what one article in *Descent* calls the ‘grim and squalid’ (Elsley and Smallshire, 1999). For every breakthrough to undiscovered ‘virgin passage’, there are often days, weeks, months of toil to clear mud and boulder obstructions –what Frank Pearson (2012) calls the ‘cold, muddy servitude’ of digging (p. 22).

At the end of the dig, in those rare, dreamed-of cases where a major breakthrough occurs, there is typically, in the written performance of caving culture, a ‘threshold moment’. The dreamed-of passages and chambers beyond a boulder ‘choke’ are often signalled by draughts, the stronger the more promising, which –as the choke is conquered- grow increasingly strong. Other signs –the rumble of water, say- signal the close presence of the unknown on the other side. When the breakthrough comes, the threshold moment tends to be sustained as the explorer tries to take in what they’ve discovered. Ordinary time stops, as they take in the enormity of an encounter with deep, geological time in a space which may, on some rare occasions, never have been encountered before. This threshold moment represents the persistence of the sublime in caving culture, framed and set off by the ordinariness of what precedes, and indeed follows it. The visual representation by cavers of their sport reinforces this framing of the geological sublime by the human ordinary, with classic chiaroscuro images of tiny figures dwarfed by immense volumes set off by daylight portrait shots filled by comradely groups or individuals ruefully enduring the tedium and hardship of the dig (See Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Paul Deakin, 'The stunning Titan shaft', as reproduced in *Descent*, 147, p. 10.





Figure 5. Frank Pearson, 'Mandy Winstanley exiting from Breakup Rift on the way out of the dig', as reproduced in *Descent*, 223, p. 32.

During the long days of digging, the experience of exploration is characteristically shared by a small group, united by the difficulty and hardship of a project, the often carefully limited dissemination of its details, and the ignorance and lack of interest of the public and media about what might be going on beneath their feet. Once the breakthrough has been made, the situation changes. A big discovery will be shared with the caving community, but may also attract wider interest. In some cases the new 'landscape' discovered is then, in theory, accessible to anyone. Access is a constant preoccupation of the caving press –almost a neurosis. At a grand scale, public policy regulating the use of landscape may or may not recognise the value of underground landscapes or the needs of cavers, and may overlook them altogether.<sup>iii</sup> But the more typical, everyday concern of the caver is the careful negotiation of access arrangements with local landowners (generally farmers) to particular mines and caves, and the limitation of this access through locks, grilles, club membership and protocols, in order to protect these often delicate relationships. In part, the issue of access is clearly one of safety. When entry-points are capped, it's in an attempt to prevent the kinds of accidents that can result from casual, inexperienced exploration. But this preoccupation with access can also seem to be an integral part of the caver's desire to preserve the distinctness and separateness of their culture and their caves. An article by Ben Lovett (1999), describing the exploration of a new part of Ogof Draenen, North of Blaenavon, captures eloquently what it is the locks and caps protect –in the words of Lovett's title, 'a sense of wilderness'. Caving, it seems, is engaged in a perpetual rear-guard action against this erosion of the wild –carefully maintaining yet restricting access, and patrolling the boundary between the ordinary, public experience of Underland and the residually wild experience available beyond that boundary to the caver.



This boundary is most conspicuously embodied in the limit which divides the showcave from the passages beyond. In the case of the Peak Cavern system this limit is carefully marked and regulated. Access for cavers through and beyond the showcave is granted by the owner for the off-season period running between October and March. Bookings to cave via the Peak Cavern showcave and the Titan shaft are now managed via the *Peak Speedwell System* website –a site designed specifically for cavers (<http://www.peakspeedwell.info/index.php/access-information>). Most bookings made are by regional clubs, who will have the requisite insurance in place, via their affiliation to the British Caving Association. Another way for the public to experience sport caving and the experience of extensive systems to which access has been limited, is via an ‘adventure tourism’ experience. Adventure tourists who pay a little under £100 for a day-long adventure caving experience in the Peak understand themselves as having been given privileged access across a threshold, and the ways in which they record this experience draws on the caver’s mix of sublime wonder and rueful stoicism. One amongst many enthusiastic Tripadvisor reviews begins: ‘What an absolutely fantastic day underground! We were lucky enough to go through one of the local "show caves" and then beyond through the vast series of cave systems in Castleton!’ (ER\_PLANT, 2015). Like Plumptre in 1793, these tourists have, through luck or discrimination, unlocked a kind of subterranean experience definitively different to that of showcave tourism.

More than two centuries after Plumptre’s visit, showcave tourism itself still thrives at Castleton. The sociability of the experience has reached a new level of intensity, with regular Christmas carol concerts and occasional film screenings and gigs staged in Peak Cavern (Crane & Fletcher, p. 169). Despite these efforts, some visitors still record their disappointment at the experience in terms which echo Daniel Defoe’s ‘wonderless wonders’. A Tripadvisor comment posted by ‘ATX\_Tips’ in July 2015 is typical of both the best and worst that visitors tend to say about their visit: ‘the tour guide was great, but a great guide doesn’t make up for an underwhelming cavern’. Few of the reviews record anything like excitement or admiration. If they have a good experience, it’s because the tour guide was interesting, knowledgeable or charismatic and they simply had a good day out with friends or family; if they have a bad one, it’s because the staff were rude, the tickets expensive and the cave ‘underwhelming’. Yet almost none of the reviewers associate the banality of their experience, good or bad, with the limitations of the practice of showcave tourism itself, or show their awareness of the 17 km of caving system which lies beyond the limits of the showcave tour. Only one or two of the reviews mention the sport of caving as an alternative way of encountering the caves. It’s as if the gates, the keys, the protocols and the performance of caving culture have been almost entirely successful in maintaining the near-virginity of the caving experience; **the separateness of the Peak’s cultural-geographic layers**. The tourists who continue to flock in their millions to showcaves such as Peak Cavern, as they have for so many years, are looking for something different to the caving experience: something more temporally and socially ordinary, and something with which bathetic disappointment –like rain on a daytrip- is reassuringly compatible.

### Writing Underland

Having described two distinct cultural practices through which the subterranean karst landscapes of the Derbyshire Peak are experienced and performed –those of showcave tourism and caving- I now want to turn to a third –literary landscape writing- and to examine ways in which it draws upon and inflects the other two. One of the most striking features of the corpus of Peak District landscape writing is its sparse and fragmentary nature. Attempts to construct a canon of Peak literature from these fragments have tended to produce a patchwork as discontinuous as the landscape itself: a ‘cumulative’, rather than singular literary image, like Hobbes’s wonder-canon or the Visit Peak District visual montage (Shimwell, p. 33). Nonetheless, argues D.W. Shimwell, literary images of the Peak as a refuge from the hell of Elizabeth Gaskell’s industrial city, and as John Ruskin’s precious Arcadia under threat, were vital influences on the creation of the National Park.

Moreover the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a significant new body of literary Peak writing which has the potential to play a role in defining the identity and value of the Peak for the policy-makers of the twenty-first century, as the writing of Ruskin did for the creators of the National Park. A substantial body of this new work is framed by two long-term projects: the Peak District Poet Laureate scheme, first established in 2006, and the collaboration between the painter Paul Evans and ten poets titled *The Wonders of the Peak*.

As David Cooper describes in this issue, the Peak District Poet Laureate scheme, funded and coordinated by Derbyshire County Council, brings poetry and the poet into contact with the ordinary, everyday experiences and interests of those communities and interest groups, from schools to football clubs, who live in the area. As such, it's unsurprising that poetry in the four collections so far generated by the scheme can comfortably embrace the communal, ordinary, everyday experience of landscape. Cathy Grindrod's (2007) 'Journey (through Poole's Cavern, Buxton)' follows a workshop in the cavern on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2006, the first of the two years in which she held the position of Peak District Poet Laureate (see p. 74). The first two stanzas read:

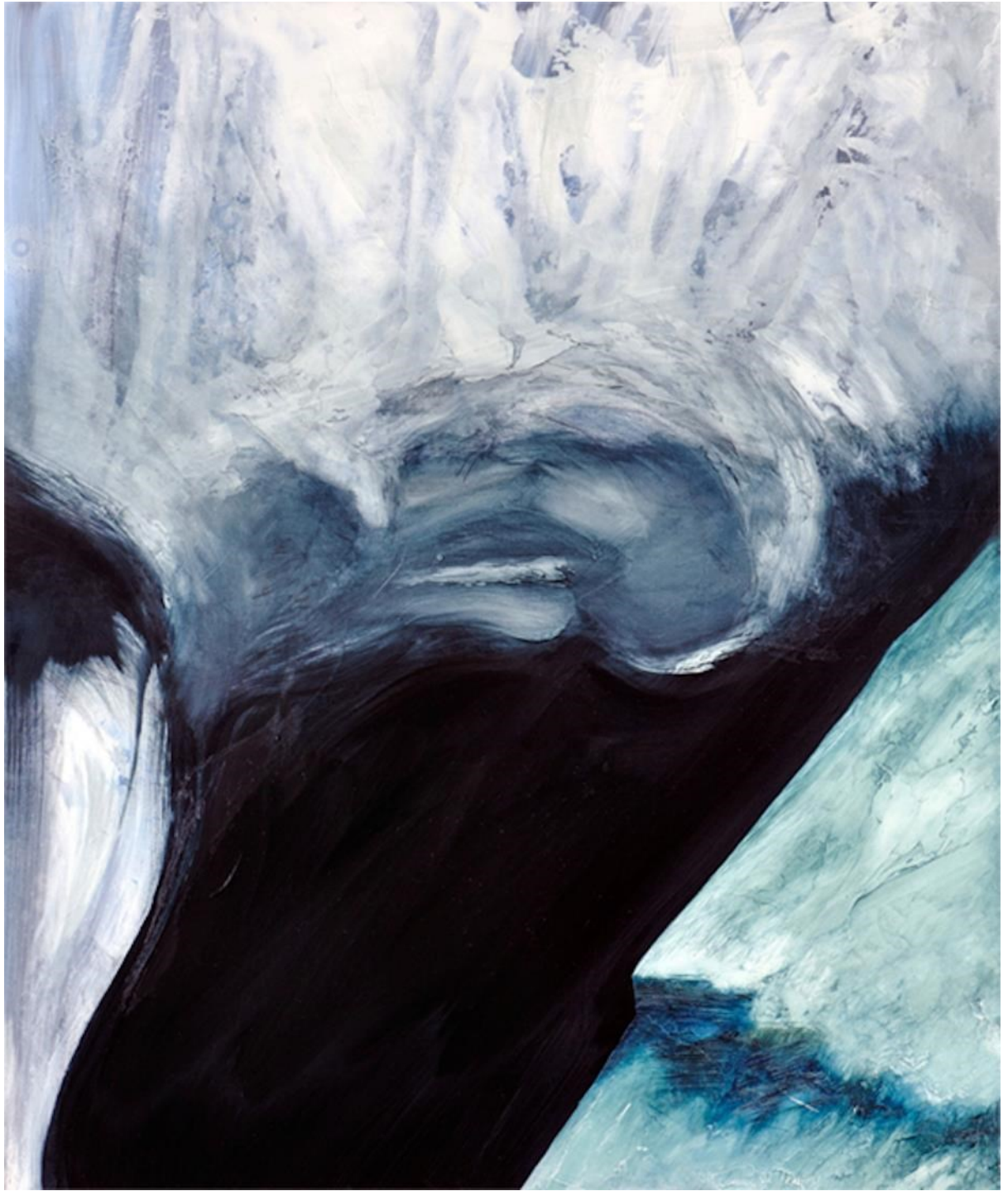
Here food is granted its important place –  
limestone bacon, poached iron oxide eggs,  
shrugged quivering from cool calcite pots.  
Cauliflower rears albino, monstrous;  
Wedding cake brims bright with mica bits.

We place our shy hands on a phallic stump  
of rock, start a raucous giggling fit  
which spasms on, swelling to a peak  
at this, the smirking horror of a hard  
cold breast, its single leaking eye. (p. 13)

Grindrod's poem draws on the tropes of centuries of cave tourism in the Peak. The experience the poem represents is a sociable one; the poetic voice a 'we'. This is the best of the tourist showcave experience in the Peak. The guide and the company are good, and the group are having fun. The landscape itself is anthropomorphised, as the Peak karst so consistently is, with that traditional bawdy anthropomorphism of 'phallic stump' and breast, suggestive of the ordinary sensual pleasures of sex and food, and whilst this landscape might be 'monstrous', the tourist's response to it is one of 'smirking horror' –of fear undercut by 'raucous' shared humour. There is no sense here of desire for, or resentment at exclusion from the sublime experience that might lie beyond or below the limits of the showcave experience. As Peak District Poet Laureate, Cathy Grindrod celebrates the ordinary, yet age-old pleasures of day-tripping tourism in the UK's most popular National Park, and captures an essential aspect of this landscape's cultural identity.

If Grindrod's poem performs the local daytripper's engagement with the Peak Underland, there's another strain of Peak landscape writing which comes much closer to the caver's. *The Wonders of the Peak* is a collaboration between Sheffield artist Paul Evans and ten poets. The paintings and poems are characterised by Evans (2010) as 'a passionate, contemporary response to Hobbes's poem', but Evans depicts the relationship of this project to the literary past as ambivalent. 'Apart from Peak Cavern and Mam Tor,' writes Evans, 'our list differs from that of Hobbes in a way that we hope reflects the sense of wonder and sensibilities of today's viewer or reader. Our list includes nothing man-made'. This revision of the Wonder canon is part of a drive to re-imagine that natural landscape, 'drained of human life', that Evans feels the early modern visitors to the Peak would themselves have encountered, to bring the experience of landscape 'back to sensation', and to restore a 'sublime perspective' on 'powerful geological forces, operating through deep time'.

This recovery of sensation means, in one respect, the stripped down embodiment of a particular, yet timeless encounter with stone, water, light and wind. But sensuality has its own cultural history, as the project's paratexts acknowledge, and the sensuality of their encounter with an immersive, often anthropomorphised karst landscape, together with their ambivalence about the sociability of the Peak, connects these texts intimately with established traditions of practice and representation. Where Evans describes his own representation of Peak Cavern as 'cleansed of the tourist paraphernalia that now clutters the opening of the Devil's Arse' he is repeating the historical turn to the sublime that depopulated the Peak in representation of its ropemakers, its native guides and its rowdy visitors, and re-inscribing the boundary that separates the 'sublime' layer of experience still accessible to the caver, from the mundane layer of the tourist. At the same time, in his anthropomorphic depiction of the cave mouth, he engages with a rich literary and touristic heritage stretching back to the seventeenth century that links his sublime painting with Grindrod's poem (see Figure 6).



Paul Evans, 'Peak Cavern' (2012), <https://seven-wonders.org/seven-wonders-2012/peak-cavern/>.

The poem by Angelina D’Roza which accompanies Evans’s painting of Peak Cavern is an ekphrastic encounter with the painting itself, which like the landscape is a product of fluid processes and sedimentation (<https://seven-wonders.org/seven-wonders-2012/peak-cavern/>). Like the painting, the poem refines, or cleanses the cave experience, stripping away the social and the everyday, and leaving a sublimity of pure sensation. But for D’Roza, as for Grindrod and Evans, Peak Cavern is an anthropomorphised body, with yawning mouth, tooth, clefts and veins. Her imaginative encounter with it is both spiritual and physically immersive: both body and rock as porous as limestone, and language the watery medium that dissolves their separation –the river ‘stutters’ and

words 'silt' her ear. The catching at the throat of language is one here with the 'stricture' of a vice-like squeeze through rock, or the breath of a draught through a boulder 'choke': a fearful hesitation on the threshold of experience. This threshold moment, where light and courage have been snuffed, is the sublime moment, before the eyes adjust to the darkness, and language and the body take the measure of the cave. It is the moment before physical sensation tumbles into language, and language gets the measure of it. And as always with the sublime, the imaginative experience of the cave here is solitary, individual –the voice an 'I'. The speaker waits for guidance at the threshold of the cave, like a penitent at confession, waiting for the priest to license her speech, but, in tune with the immersive quality of the poem, when she follows into the cave, it's the stream itself she follows, and the stone which 'urges' her on. There is no human guide here, and certainly no tourist ticket-booth. D'Roza's poem performs the anthropomorphised landscape of caving, where the distinction between body and place is dissolved and the karst landscape itself shakes, ducks, breathes, chokes and goes.

If Cathy Grindrod performs the daytripping tourist's caving experience, and Angelina D'Roza the caver's, there's a way in which Robert Macfarlane (2013), in a piece written for *Granta* about a caving trip in the Peak, performs something rather like the intermediate experience of the adventure tourist. Macfarlane is an accomplished and experienced climber, but a newcomer to caving. Having grown up in North Nottinghamshire, twenty miles east of Peak 'karst country', Macfarlane knew the region as the playground of family day-trips, when his encounters with its underland were the characteristic showcave visits, and curious encounters with cavers, 'gophering up from holes in the ground' (pp. 45-6). Now, as is often the case in his landscape/travel writing, Macfarlane has put himself in the hands of a local expert who will act as his guide, and he, in turn, is the reader's guide to and translator of the strange underland of caving culture. His destination is Giant's Hole –a favourite beginner's cave for the Peak's adventure tourism experiences.

As with many accounts of caving, a great deal is made in Macfarlane's of the through-the-wardrobe threshold moment which separates the cave from the surface world. He's an onlooker to a jargon-filled conversation between his guide and 'A caver with a pointy beard and dirty legs' who has just emerged from Giant's Hole (48). The threshold here is both the physical portal between the daylight ordinariness of sheep grazing and the dark unknown of the cave, and the boundary marking Macfarlane's initiation into the arcane culture of caving. Macfarlane's account of his experience within the cave tries to capture the aesthetic uniqueness of the landscape, which presents 'a pure geology of the baroque'. (p. 52) He also tries to capture the uniqueness of movement and sensation within this unique space and, finding language re-shaped along with his own body, 'wanted new words for this new world, a liquid language for a liquid landscape' (p. 53). At the end of the trip Macfarlane is driven by his guide to 'the upper edge of a vast flux quarry', where he sees a startled fox 'which flowed away from us, orange over the boulders, then poured himself into a cleft in the quarry wall', and experiences the 'visible world' as 'something to be walked not over but into'. (p. 59) This dissolution of hard distinctions between water, rock, humanity and nature; this revelation of involvement, fluidity and porosity, is part of a karst poetic which Macfarlane himself has linked to the poet W.H. Auden (Crane and Fletcher, 129), and which Jess Edwards (2012) has traced further back in the seventeenth-century landscape poetry of Charles Cotton. The sense of a landscape which is receptive to humanity is the common ground where radically different cultures meet and overlap, and where the social and temporal ordinariness of the local daytrip meets the sublime immensity of geological time.

## Conclusion

This article began with the proposition that the Peak District is both a physically and a culturally layered landscape, for which no consensually agreed definition of distinctiveness or value has been achieved, and I'd like to conclude by arguing that this plurality should be acknowledged as a defining characteristic, rather than a confusion to be resolved. By focusing in this article on one

aspect of the Peak landscape, the White Peak karst, I've sought to demonstrate that there is a history of separate, even contradictory cultural practices coexisting in one multilayered space. For the distinctiveness and value of the Peak's landscapes to be articulated in ways that are meaningful for those large and disparate communities to whom they're valuable, these articulations must capture something of this vertical plurality which has always been both metaphor and reality. Although the Peak District 'underland' is only accessed more than superficially by a few, and thus might be considered irrelevant to the everyday experience of communities and tourists, the presence of known and undiscovered immensities of space and geological time beneath the car parks and the footpaths is the unconscious and the imaginary of the landscape, and integral to its identity as 'a land to forget time'.



## Figure Captions

Figure 1. Visit Peak District and Derbyshire, 'The Land to Forget Time', <http://thelandtoforgettime.co.uk/>.

Figure 2. Isaac Cruikshank, 'View in Peak Hole after passing the first river', 1797.

Figure 3. George Cumberland, Inside the Peak Cavern, Castleton, Derbyshire, ca. 1820.

Figure 4. Paul Deakin, 'The stunning Titan shaft', as reproduced in *Descent*, 147, p. 10.

Figure 5. Frank Pearson, 'Mandy Winstanley exiting from Breakup Rift on the way out of the dig', as reproduced in *Descent*, 223, p. 32.

Figure 6. Paul Evans, 'Peak Cavern' (2012), <https://seven-wonders.org/seven-wonders-2012/peak-cavern/>.

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- <sup>i</sup> Allows, rather than requires, because this elision of vertical limestone landscapes is not universal in LCA. Whilst the 1997 Mendip LCA makes little mention of famous local cave systems, this is not the case in the 2002 Yorkshire Dales LCA, which pays considerable attention to the 'extensive underground landscape' of the Craven Dales area (p. 77).
- <sup>ii</sup> See Beck 1999a, Beck 1999b, Nixon 2003, Nixon 2003/4 and Nixon 2004 for the story of the detective work which led to the discovery of Titan, including the use by Nixon of information from Plumptre's account, and the story of the subsequent dig down from Hurdlow Moor to establish direct surface access to the Titan shaft.
- <sup>iii</sup> See Williams (1999) for a caver's overview of national legislation since the creation of the National Parks. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000 was much debated by cavers (see <http://british-caving.org.uk/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?t=26>), as it failed to specify whether new rights to 'open air recreation' on open access land applied to caving.