

The Dowards

Jim Handley (EHT Champion)

FIVE YEARS ON! Never volunteer – I did! Don't be greedy – I was! Any regrets – not enough time!

No not an ego trip but a biased look back at my years volunteering as a champion for the Earth Heritage Trust (EHT) at The Dowards, two hills on the north rim of the Wye Gorge in southern Herefordshire.

Moving to pastures new in Monmouth in 2016, I was only just down the road from The Dowards. Ray Whiley was the first champion for EHT at Little Doward and

there is still a seat he made dated 2012 at the highest point of the hill fort there. When I arrived he was looking for support. I walked round with him, passed his unofficial exam and took the lead armed with much of his valuable local knowledge. The greedy bit surfaced because at many levels – geologically, archaeologically, social history-wise and so on – Great and Little Doward are effectively a unit. Together they command the northern rim of the Wye Gorge and benefit from being treated as a whole, when leading walks or writing leaflets [see the EHT Explore Wye Gorge Trail leaflet]

The basic stratigraphy of Little Doward ascends from Devonian Old Red Sandstone (ORS) through the Huntsham Hill Conglomerate and Tintern Sandstone into the Carboniferous limestones and shales of the Avon Group, the Barry Harbour dolomitic Limestone and the Gully Oolite. Great Doward then adds the Llanelly Formation limestone and the Cromhall Sandstone Formation to the story.

Getting below the surface [sorry!], let me highlight seven features to encourage you to make a first or a return visit to the Dowards.

- Excellent exposures of most of the rocks. Indeed, only the ORS and Tintern Sandstone are mainly masked by weathered material. The flash flood deposits of the conglomerate are impressive both visually and for their depositional story. The dolomitic cliffs stand proud. Together they all provide the tools to tell of major different regimes and conditions.
- Much of the area of limestone pavement within the

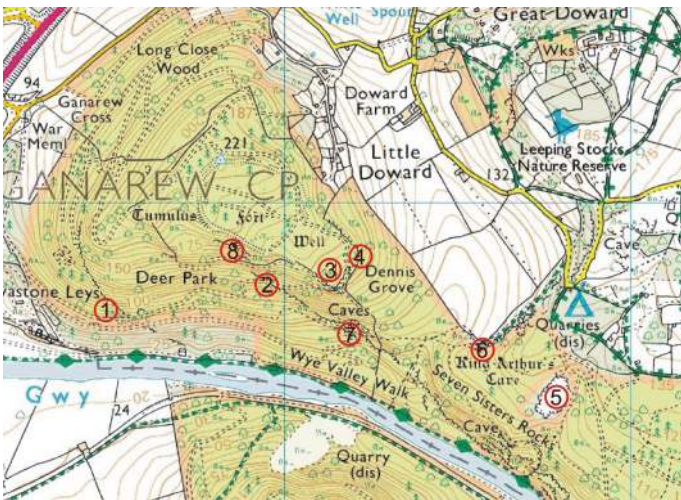


Figure 1 Map of Little Doward showing the locations mentioned in the article. 1, Conglomerate exposure, 2. Dolomitic cliffs, 3. Limestone pavement, 4. Water-eroded cliff, 5. Lord's Wood Quarry, 6. King Arthurs Cave, 7. Cleft in cliff, 8. Blakemore features

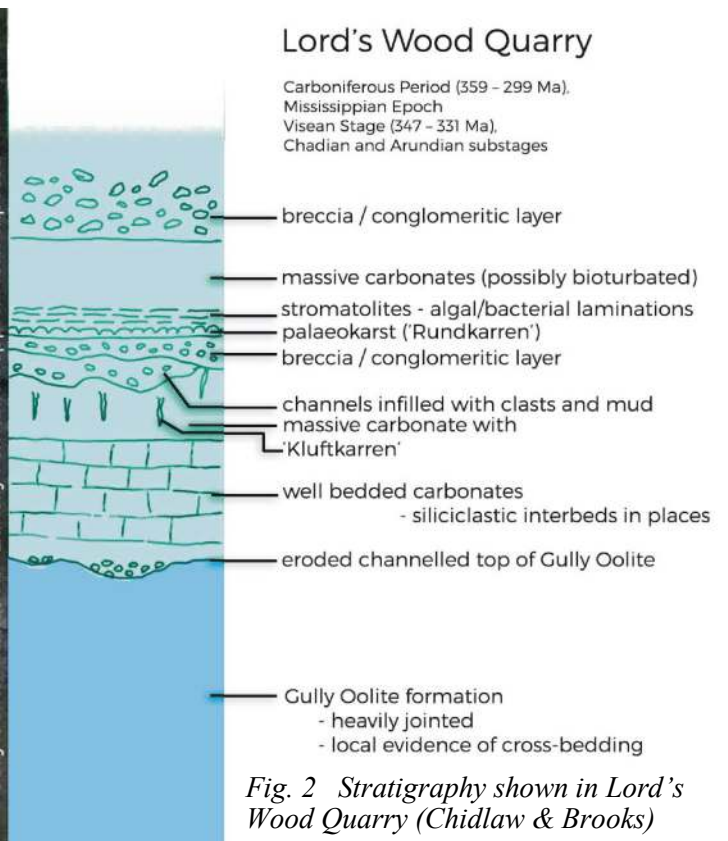


Fig. 2 Stratigraphy shown in Lord's Wood Quarry (Chidlaw & Brooks)



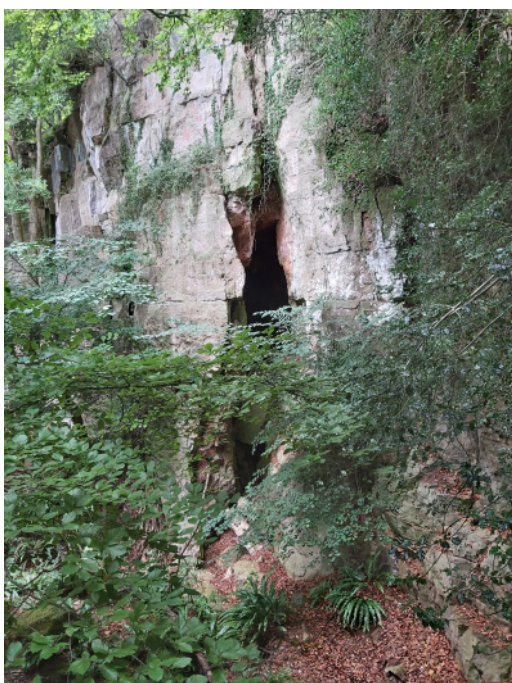
Fig. 3 A cleared section of the limestone pavement and a colonial fossil found within it.

Iron Age Fort is hidden by bracken. But one key corner has been exposed by an EHT working party. Apart from the karst characteristic clints and grikes, we have a reef surface with excellent colonial fossils [probably *Lithostrotion Vorticale*]. (Fig.3)

- The Wye Gorge demands an article to itself but for a recent summary please see pages 170-1 in the Herefordshire Rocks and Scenery book. Water-worn surfaces form a defensive cliff feature of the Iron Age Fort and are also around King Arthur's Cave. Even now it is quite challenging to work out the sequence of river flows that can produce cliff features facing in various directions.
- For those wanting a more demanding examination of two of the rock formations, I would recommend the excellent case study of Lords Wood Quarry done by Nick Chidlaw and Michael Brooks for the EHT (<https://deeptime.voyage/resources/lordswood>) Here geological detective work lays bare the complicated story lying behind what at first sight is merely the Gully Oolite limestone overlain by the Llanelly limestone. Looking closer there are features including karst erosion periods, paleosoils, infilled river chan-

nels and layered stromatolites (Fig.2). The study includes drone footage showing close ups. The quarry is well worth an hour or two of anyone's time. To access the quarry needs permission from the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust. They are content that serious students can have access and I have their blessing to take groups in.

- The Dowards have more than their fair share of caves. Best known is King Arthur's Cave but adjacent to this are others which also show the erosive power of water both internally within the oolitic rock and later externally from the glacial meltwater of the Wye. On the eastern edge of Great Doward various cave entrances can be seen from the safety of footpaths. Out of sight down the cliff faces below the viewpoints there are at least ten other caves worthy of examination for the fit, but only if accompanied by a caver who knows their stuff. I have only been taken into the entrance areas of some of these caves but one could readily see where miners seeking haematite deposits have worked. One intriguing feature on Little Doward is a cleft in the dolomitic cliff with a roof fall blocking the entrance. Behind on the right can be seen an intriguing bit of creative building (Fig.4).



- Talking of iron, below Great Doward and just downstream from the Saracen's Head on the opposite bank, is the site of New Forge (SO 5559 1556). There is a full account of this in the excellent article written by Rosalind Lowe in 2010 as her presidential address for the Woolhope Club. Visiting the site, especially in winter, you can still pick out some key features and have your coffee sitting on the slag deposits that flowed into the Wye.

- No article about Little Doward would be complete without some reference to the Victorian MP and iron-master Richard Blakemore who lived

Fig. 4 Cleft within the Barry Harbour Limestone



nearby and who owned the hill within its amazing set of boundary walls. He created the network of carriageways and walks which to this day make exploration so much easier. But his 'love' of geology led him to create a set of features to entertain his guests. Although unfortunately not easy to access below the southern lip of the iron age fort, these include a hermitage, a tunnel under an oolitic exposure, a viewing platform, a giant stone seat and a large slab of limestone pavement planted vertically! (Fig.5), Maybe the wall in the cave [Fig 4] is another example.

Should all this whet your appetite, please get in touch [jim.s.handley@gmail.com] and let me show you more.

Fig. 5 One of Blakemore's 'features' on Little Doward — a vertical slab of limestone pavement
