

Have you Explored the Special Qualities of Mendip's Caves?

#mendipcaves

Have you been down a cave on Mendip? And that doesn't include the showcaves of Cheddar or Wookey! Amazing as they are and I thoroughly recommend visiting them both, they can't really be considered as 'going caving'. The [Mendip Cave Registry](#) shows there are over 2000 registered caves on the Mendip Hills. Caves are linked to many of the 12 'special qualities' of the Mendip Hills AONB; visible geology, evidence of human settlements, archaeology, the limestone aquifer, adventure, so they're a great way of experiencing Mendip.



Did you know there's a certain style to Mendip caves? It's all to do with the unique geology of Mendip where the limestone meets the sandstone. Water can erode limestone but it can't get through the sandstone. The characteristics of limestone then create cave systems in a zig-zag fashion. To see a really good diagram of this visit [Foundations of Mendip](#). It shows how the rocks have been forced up meaning a change in the water table that creates

different links between cave systems.

As with any adventure there is an element of risk. Thousands of people go caving each year, on organised trips and as part of caving clubs, inevitably there will be accidents. Luckily we have the amazing [Mendip Cave Rescue](#) on call 24/7, 365 days a year via the police. To demonstrate how 'deep' the caving tradition is on Mendip they started way back in 1936. The first caving club on Mendip, and one of the earliest in the country, started in 1906.

Originally they were known as the Mendip Rescue Organisation, and are the second oldest cave rescue team in the country. Fortunately incidents are rare but a scan of the incidents list on their website reveals the wide variety of call-outs they get from the police. The most recent (at the time of publishing 4/10/19) was to help with the search for a missing person in Ebbor Gorge where there are several caves, but they've also helped a Jack Russell terrier out of a cave system, people who have got lost in the networks as well as the injured. They are all volunteers whose local expertise and specialist training is invaluable. They're part of the community and part of the rich cultural heritage on Mendip.

Another cave that gives us an insight into the cultural heritage of the area is the



Banwell Bone Caves. As part of the Mendip Rocks! programme we've organised trips down the weird and wonderful [Banwell Bone Caves](#) so that people can still see the unique collection of bones there. Alongside the way the bones dating back over 70,000 years have been washed down via melting ice ages into a swallet and the underlying cave, the site also reveals how religion and tourism have shaped the hills.

The site is still on land owned by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, as was a lot of the Mendip Hills in the past. The Bishop at the time of the discovery of the caves in the Victorian era used the site as evidence for the Great Flood and Noah's Ark. The Bishop's land over Mendip was some of the first to be 'enclosed' by the iconic drystone walls to protect the valuable grazing ground. It was also at this time that the railway network reached Weston -super-Mare, to enhance the 'visitor-offer' follies were built at the site, and other caves became attractions like Cheddar and Wookey.

There's probably more of Mendip underground than there is above and certainly the underground history is just as fascinating to explore as on the surface.