



Royston's Historic Cave

The Royston Cave is a unique man-made structure over 25 feet (7.7m) high, roughly bell-shaped and which has been hollowed out of the layer of chalk 60m thick underlying the town. The cave is situated very close to the Royston Cross marking the junction of the Icknield Way and Ermine Street, the Roman road linking London and York.

Most walkers following the Icknield Way through the town will be unaware of the cave's proximity as they walk over a small open grille in the southern pavement of Melbourn Street outside the betting shop. The grille allows a little light to penetrate the cave.

Before Royston Town Council assumed responsibility for it, relatively uncontrolled access to the cave had resulted in the lower walls being carved with visitors' graffiti. This resulted in railings being installed to prevent the walls being touched.

Visitors to the cave are now escorted by members of Royston & District Local History Society, who act as guides at weekends during the summer months. The Society monitors the temperature and humidity inside the cavity – the former registers a steady 10 degrees Centigrade and the latter is always high.

The upper walls of the cave are decorated with Mediaeval carvings in low relief, attributed to the ancient Order of the Knights Templar; these help to date the cave's origin to around 1300AD, although it may have incorporated an earlier excavation. The cave was possibly used by the Order as a secret meeting place during the years of persecution when the Order was finally suppressed. Sometime after this, the cave's use was discontinued and it was loosely filled with earth, the entrance sealed off with a millstone and covered with earth.

For the next 400 years, it remained undetected and forgotten with a building housing the Royston butter market being constructed above it. Then in 1742, the millstone was, by chance, raised and the cave's entrance re-discovered. However, the narrow vertical entry shaft made getting in and out of the cave very difficult so, in 1790, a tunnel entrance was cut through the chalk from a house across the street. This entrance has been used ever since with the original shaft entrance re-sealed and located beneath the street.

The unique array of Mediaeval carvings around the cave wall includes both symbols and human figures, many of which have now been identified. There are four saints of particular importance to the Knights Templar, namely St Christopher, St Katherine, St Lawrence and St George. Also depicted are the Holy Sepulchre, the Holy Family and various pagan fertility symbols. Some of the cave's features are thought to have Masonic significance. A wooden upper platform once existed above the array of carvings, thus facilitating access to the various niched shelves cut into the upper part of the cave wall.

In 1964, Royston Cave was listed as a Grade 1 monument by English Heritage (now Heritage England). As far as is known, it is unique in Europe.

[In 2008, a detailed study of the Cave was commissioned by the Royston Town Council and supported by a generous grant and specialist advice from English Heritage, with the aim of understanding how and why the Cave is deteriorating, so that measures to conserve it could be developed.]

For more information go to www.roystoncave.co.uk

Chris James
Icknield Way News Spring 2001