

EAST WEMYSS CAVES AND MACDUFF'S CASTLE

In August 2001 quiet high pressure weather presented an opportunity to explore the East Wemyss caves and MacDuff's castle from the adjacent open anchorage. These sandstone caves were formed by the sea when at 8 and 16m above the present level. They are remarkable for their Pictish markings, said to be more numerous than in all the other caves of Britain put together. Professor James Young Simpson of chloroform anaesthesia fame described them in 1865 from when archaeology took notice. However over the years industrial activity, shock from a coastal gun battery, vandalism, weathering and coastal erosion have all taken their toll. Major damage has occurred to the caves from this combination but some serious sea wall construction was in progress during my visit.

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in Pictish symbols as a look at a public library shelf demonstrates and in 2004 Channel 4's Time Team joined a project to record the caves by laser scanning.

I anchored below MacDuff's castle in 3.5m in light rain but this soon dried off. An anchorage below a castle is a romantic spot and one with Shakespearean associations was an added bonus. Castle and caves are set amongst grassy slopes and deciduous woodland. They are linked by more than close proximity, a passage from the castle connected with the Well cave, MacDuff's escape route from Macbeth while making his way to the MacDuff cave on Kincaig Point. Cave entrances can be very muddy and slippery when wet so I was glad to see the weather improving.

On shore there was not a soul in sight, good news for the dinghy. One is always wary of leaving it unattended. I was soon ashore and busy looking at the caves using the excellent guide by Frank Rankin. Incised drawings abound but the caves are in a pretty dreadful state. The Save Wemyss Ancient Caves Society SWACS is engaged in maintenance, preservation and lobbying for funds but can't mount a round the clock guard. Elsewhere in Europe cave decoration of this antiquity and extent is treated as a national treasure. Here cars have been burned, rubbish dumped and the grass showed evidence of a very alcoholic barbecue.

Whilst there are around a dozen caves there is nothing much to excite the sport caver. Fifty metres of passage is about the maximum length so you won't get lost but beware of loose rock. A hard hat and good torch are necessary. Boots and a boiler suit are a good idea. Historical and archaeological curiosities are the attractions here. I worked my way through the caves being keen to see the ship in Jonathan's cave. It is now quite faint and I couldn't see it but many other pictures are readily discernable. Some of the drawings have been highlighted with chalk. The best conservation policy is look and don't touch. The sandstone is very friable. Every person tracing a design with their finger removes yet more of the detail.

It was soon time to look at the castle. Much of it has been demolished due to its condition but a tower with spiral stair remains, allowing one to reach the top. I found my way in although the access was quite overgrown. The castle is also sandstone. Unfortunately its soft texture that encouraged cave dwellers to cut their pictures has meant it is very prone to weathering. In parts the exterior surface is so deeply grooved and honeycombed it is a striking phenomenon, a challenge for the

photographer. Both the cave decoration and the sculpture of the castle stonework need side lighting to show the detail in relief to best effect.

Back aboard by 7 pm, the barometric pressure unchanged and the wind light and variable I decided to stay the night. My alternative refuge in the event of a change in the weather was Inchkeith Island. Eating whilst enjoying the panorama ashore all was very tranquil. I hoisted a riding light and was soon fast asleep.

At 23-55 hrs awakened very suddenly by a terrific noise, I leapt on deck fearing I was about to be run down. Close by was a large inshore lifeboat with twin outboards. The crew had received reports of flares being sighted. I of course had heard nothing having switched the radio off when I turned in. They had come to investigate, anchoring here being unusual and seeing nobody aboard. The lesson must be to let the Coastguard know what you are doing. I had not reported, regarding the anchorage as home waters and conditions being very settled. The crew apologised for waking me up and were gone before I had really come to. Had I thought I would have offered them a coffee. Tranquillity returned and the anchor light was still burning brightly.

By now I was wide awake and wrote the log. I wondered if some member of the public had interpreted my riding light as a distress signal. Having been at anchor in this position since 14-20 hrs I thought it unlikely but for most of the public the seafaring tradition has been left so far behind anything is possible. Next time I'll call the Coastguard to ensure an undisturbed night

I awoke to a beautiful sunny morning with a clear sky, a little more breeze and a nip in the air. At 07-25 hrs a pair of dolphins blew twice by the boat and I watched them move West beyond East Wemyss. Castle, caves and dolphins and not another boat in sight, one has a lot to be thankful for in our relatively unfrequented Northern waters. I made my way leisurely up the river and by 19-50 hrs was secure on the mooring.

References

1. Guide to Wemyss Caves, Frank Rankin, 1988, revised and reprinted 2001, ISBN 0946294 30 5. (Includes history of MacDuff's castle). Available from SWACS and Tourist Information Offices in Fife.
2. Save Wemyss Ancient Caves Society, Chairman, Bill Barker, 12 Approach Row, East Wemyss, Fife, KY1 4LB. Secretary, Ann Waters, 17 Townsend Crescent, Kirkcaldy, Fife, KY1 1DN.
3. The Caves of Scotland except Assynt, Tony Oldham, 1975. Published by the author.
4. Speleologist Volume 1, Number 2, Page 33.
5. The Fringes of Fife, John Geddie, editions 1894 and c. 1927. (Has line drawing of the Court Cave entrance before the collapse that occurred in 1970.)
6. Mackie and Glaister, Wemyss Caves, Fife, 1981.

7. Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Volume 11, 1865. Prof James Young Simpson.
8. Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, "Sculpted Caves near Dysart" 1875.
9. Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Inventory of Counties Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan, 1933.
10. The Origins and History of the Wemyss Caves.
www.thefifepost.com/wemysscaves.html
11. Caves of Britain: Wemyss Caves
www.showcaves.com/english/gb/caves/Wemyss.html
12. Wemyss Caves Carvings Laser Scanned
www.themodernantiquarian.com/post/28498
13. MacDuff's Castle
www.geo.ed.ac.uk/scotgaz/features/featurefirst9709.html

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SUBJECT TITLE: EAST WEMYSS CAVES AND MACDUFF'S CASTLE

Feature: Sandstone coastal caves and 16th century castle.

Chart No: 734 **Lat/Long:** 56° 9'.7 N 003° 3'.3 W

OS 1:50,000 sheet number Sheet 59 **Grid Ref.:** NT 345971

Subject description: Around a dozen caves, well known for their incised Pictish symbols of which there are more here than anywhere else in the UK. An interesting self guided tour can be made using the "Guide to Wemyss Caves" by Frank Rankin. Above the caves is the castle of which one tower remains. A spiral stair enables this to be climbed to the top.

Approach by sea: There are no off lying dangers.

Directions by land: Village on the A955 between Kirkcaldy and Leven. Two roads lead to the shore, one between the primary school and the cemetery at the North end and the other near the "Carshed" a newsagent. Park near the interpretation boards by Weavers Court. Follow the coastal path to caves.

Anchoring / Mooring: Anchor in 3.5 m. Best to advise MCA Fifeness as to intentions as anchoring here is unusual.

Landing: No particular landing, open shore.

Other local information: It is strongly recommended that any intending visitor obtain a copy of "Guide to Wemyss Caves" by Frank Rankin, 1988, revised and reprinted 2001, ISBN 0946294 30 5, available from Tourist Information Offices and Save Wemyss Ancient Caves Society, Secretary Ann Watters, 17 Townsend Crescent, Kirkcaldy, Fife, KY1 1DN.

References / weblinks:

1. The Origins and History of the Wemyss Caves.
www.thefifepost.com/wemysscaves.html
2. Caves of Britain: Wemyss Caves
www.showcaves.com/english/gb/caves/Wemyss.html
3. Wemyss Caves Carvings Laser Scanned
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4. MacDuff's Castle
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