

Staffordshire Cave Dwellers

An article by **Mike Newland**

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There are a number of derelict dwellings scattered around the county of Staffordshire, but did you know that there are a small group tucked away in a tiny corner of the county that were actually occupied until the 1950s? These are located at Holy Austin Rock, Kinver. The sandstone rocks themselves were formed way back in the Permian period, around 200 million years ago. The earliest recorded mention of the dwellings however dates back to 1777 when J. Heely described the rooms carved out of the soft stone as being "*curious, warm and commodious*". In 1861 there were eleven families resident in the caves, forty-five people in all. By 1891 only four families remained but these inhabitants took advantage of the fledgling tourist trade that was just beginning to emerge and began to subsidize their income by selling teas to visitors.

Water was originally supplied to residents by means of a well but the 20th Century brought in a standpipe to replace it and in the 1930s mains gas was installed. By the end of the Second World War only two families were left; the last of these departing sometime in the 1950s. Although no-one lived there anymore a café was actually in operation in the caves until 1967. The site was acquired by the National Trust in 1964 and they set about renovating it, although the first stage of restoration wasn't completed until almost thirty years later in 1993.

Harking back briefly to the dark days of the last war, lying hidden deep beneath Kinver Edge, is a complex of caves which were excavated to create a shadow munitions factory to aid the war effort. Managed by the Rover Car Company, the factory primarily produced parts for aero engines. This extensive underground complex was so large that it is quite capable of accommodating even the largest of today's articulated vehicles. Later during the Cold War the complex was designated as a nuclear bunker for use by the Regional Seat of Government (RSG). During this period the cave complex housed amongst other things, an operating theatre, a BBC studio and a sophisticated telecommunications unit.

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