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### The Mines of Mendip and of Moria

#### Abstract

Considers J.W. Gough's book on the Mendip Hills mines (beginning in the Roman period) as a source for Tolkien's depiction of Moria. Compares passages in Gough to descriptions of Moria, and suggests the Cornish miners as "loose historical equivalents" of Tolkien's dwarves. Maps.

#### Additional Keywords

England—Mendip Hills—Mining; Gough, J.W. The Mines of Mendip—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Mines and mining; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Mines of Moria—Sources

# The Mines of Mendip and of Moria

J.S. Ryan

His association with the Lydney (Gloucestershire) excavations of R.M. (later Sir Mortimer) Wheeler in the period 1929-1932 gave J.R.R. Tolkien his knowledge of the Roman and Romano-Celtic mining at that place,<sup>1</sup> and it can be shown how that excavation, and the subsequent *Report*<sup>2</sup> on it gave some shape and detail to both the narrative account and to the drawings by Tolkien of Bilbo's experiences in Smaug's Lair in *The Hobbit* (1937). To date there has however, been no specific analogue or plausible source cited in Tolkien scholarship for the rich and detailed accounts of the actual Mines of Moria in *The Lord of the Rings*, especially as they are described in such detail in its Book Two, in Chapters IV and V.

There is, however, just such a comprehensive and intriguing possible source book, which came into the hands of various of Tolkien's friends such as R.G. Collingwood, philosopher and archaeologist,<sup>3</sup> in the year 1930. It is the Oxford (Clarendon Press) publication, *The Mines of Mendip*, by J.W. Gough, who elaborated particularly in the earlier Roman period work of Professor F.J. Haverfield in *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, Somerset*, vol. 1 (1906). The latter's scholarship as to various Roman inscriptions<sup>4</sup> found on fibulae, metal pigs, lead weights, etc. is conveniently summarized for the Roman mining (*op. cit.* pp. 27, ff.). It is also possible to use the readable 1930 volume as a guide to the prolific and romantic literature as to the caves and underground mines of East Somerset, from the Roman period on, their decline and then concerns certain later periods of renewed activity, followed by further eclipse.

A particularly attractive aspect to the work of Gough is his indication of the wealth of the written material about Roman, and later, mining of the cave type — largely in the West Country — as in (sequentially):

Pliny, *Natural History*;  
Letters and Papers of Henry VIII  
J. Leland, *Itinerary* (1535-43); ed. Toulmin Smith;  
Georgius Agricola, *De Re Metallica* (Froben, Basel, 1556);  
Sir J. Pettus, *Fodinae Regales* (1670);  
Sir J. Pettus, *Fleta Minor*, the Laws of Art and Nature in Knowing ... Metals; and Essays on Metallic Words (1683); etc., etc.

Even more intriguing items from Gough's very considerable 'Bibliography' (pp. 258-264) are:

Browne's book (a manuscript held in Wells, Somerset, describing 'the mining customs, laws, etc.');

E.A. Baker and H.E. Bald, *The Netherworld of Mendip* (1907);

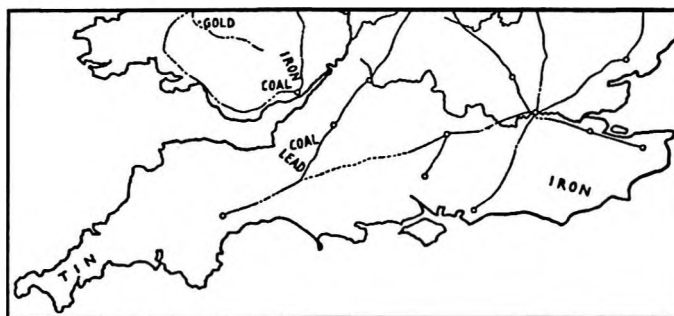
F.A. Knight, *The Heart of Mendip* (1915);  
H.E. Balch, *The Caves of Mendip* (1926); or related  
A.K. Hamilton Jenkins, *The Cornish Miner* (1927).

There is noted, too, the long series of exciting local articles by the Rev. Preb. H.M. Scarth, e.g.;

(1859), 'Investigations of Barrows on the Lines of the Roman road,' *Arch. Jnl.*, vol. xvi;  
(1875), 'Notes on the Roads, Camps, and Mining Operations of the Romans on the Mendip Hills,' *Jnl. of the Brit Arch. Assn.*, vol xxxi;  
(1879), 'The Roman Occupation of the West of England,' *Arch. Jnl.*, vol. xxxvi; etc.

Thus it is clear that the mining in and under the Mendip Hills has had a very long course, despite the seeming serious setbacks due to war, political upheaval and various other causes.

There follows an early modern map (also reproduced by Gough) of the imagined perimeter villages around the mines and caverns.



This is to the style of Collingwood's 1936 map of Roman mines in southern Britain. The word 'lead' marks the spine of the Mendip Hills.

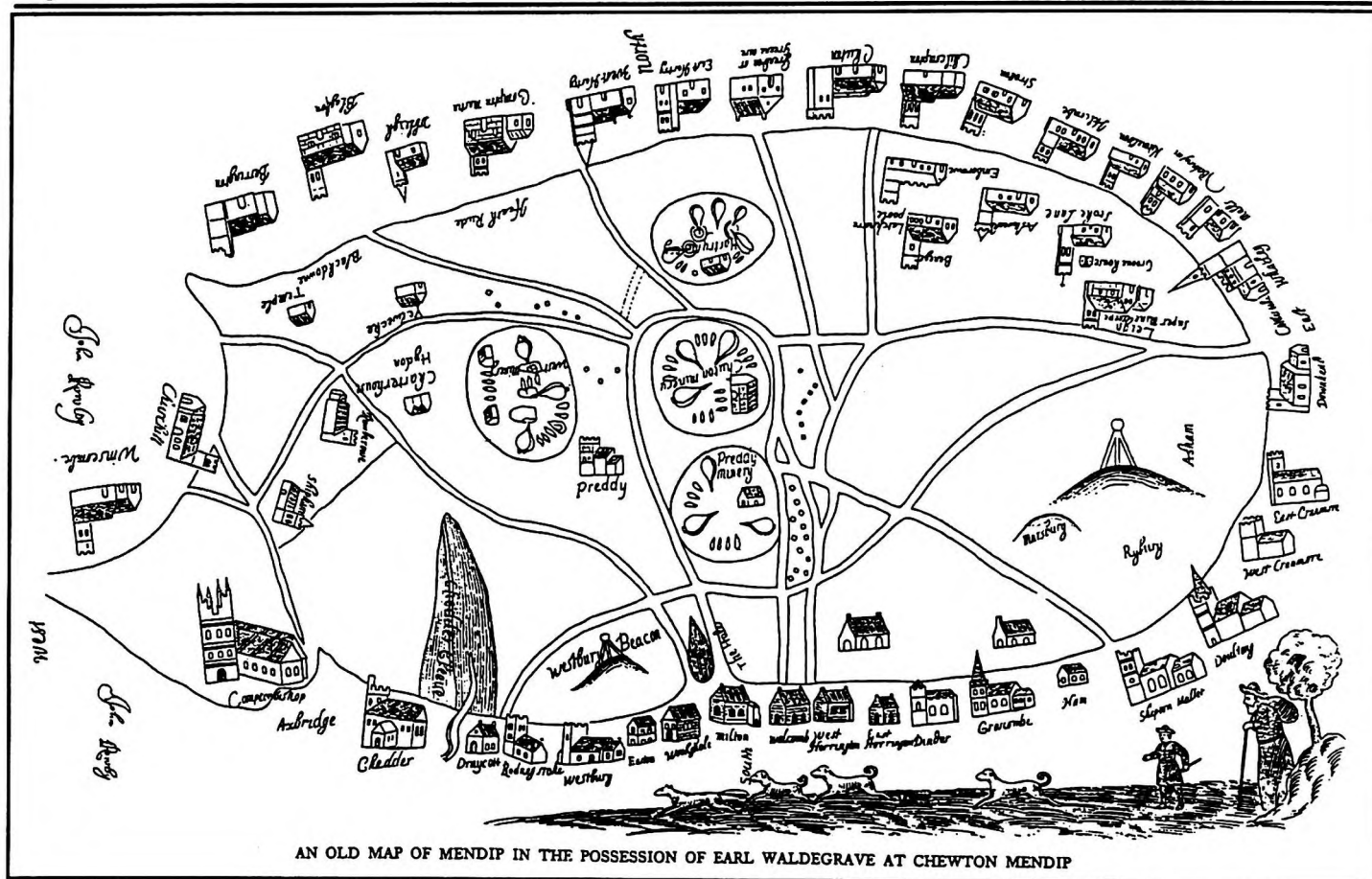
## Mendip and Tolkien's Dwarf City of Moria

Very familiar, if not echoic, to careful readers of the text of Tolkien will be such 'Introductory' remarks by Gough as:

The 'netherworld of Mendip', as is well known, is traversed in all directions by the ramifications of innumerable natural caverns..., and into these the miners delving underground must often have sunk. ...Several of the most famous Mendip caves have owned their discovery to the work of the miners. ...

Instances are also recorded of vast caverns having been discovered by the miners, but subsequently lost sight of altogether [such as] the great Banwell cave ... and ... a prodigious cavern in Sandford Hill, the identity of which has been ... elusive. (p. 9)

Even more intriguing for us is his, Gough's, quotation



AN OLD MAP OF MENDIP IN THE POSSESSION OF EARL WALDEGRAVE AT CHEWTON MENDIP

from J. Rutter's 1829 text, *Delineations of the North Western Division of Somersetshire*, as to exploration in 1770 of an enormous cave called 'the Gulf' on the northern Mendip escarpment:

80 fathoms, or 480 feet, below the surface of Sandford Hill..., they have let down a man ... 240 feet ... without his being able to discover top, sides or bottom. *op. cit.*, p. 109)

Another hill cave, in the complex, and one which cannot but remind us of the deep in which the Balrog had been confined so long, is that called Lamb's Lair, the entrance to which lies near the Wells road, a few yards beyond the top of the hill above West Harptree.<sup>6</sup> Gough paraphrases J. Beaumont's 1681 account of the cave thus:

The ground thereabouts has been the scene of mining for ages, and it was about the middle of the seventeenth century that miners working there struck into a cave whose dimensions were far beyond the ordinary. (*op. cit.*, p. 10)

The intrepid antiquarian himself found the Cavern to be 'about 60 Fathom in the circumference, above 20 Fathom in height'; yet it was lost sight of and was not entered for nearly two centuries (i.e. between 1681 and 1873). In the later Victorian period it was possible to climb down and view the cave — 'and for a few years its beauties became widely renowned' (Gough, p. 12). There was, however, no legend of a monster lurking therein.<sup>7</sup>

Paul Kocher, in his *Master of Middle-Earth: The Achievement of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1972), observes, of Gimli's response

to the earlier dwarves' smithy work and excavations.

Caught up above his usual dour self, Gimli proceeds to give a superbly lyrical picture of the echoing domes and chambers underground, the glint of polished walls [and] marble columns springing from the floor... (pp. 105-106).

This is, of course, a more wonderful account than any recorder of the 'beauties' in certain of the larger Mendip caves.

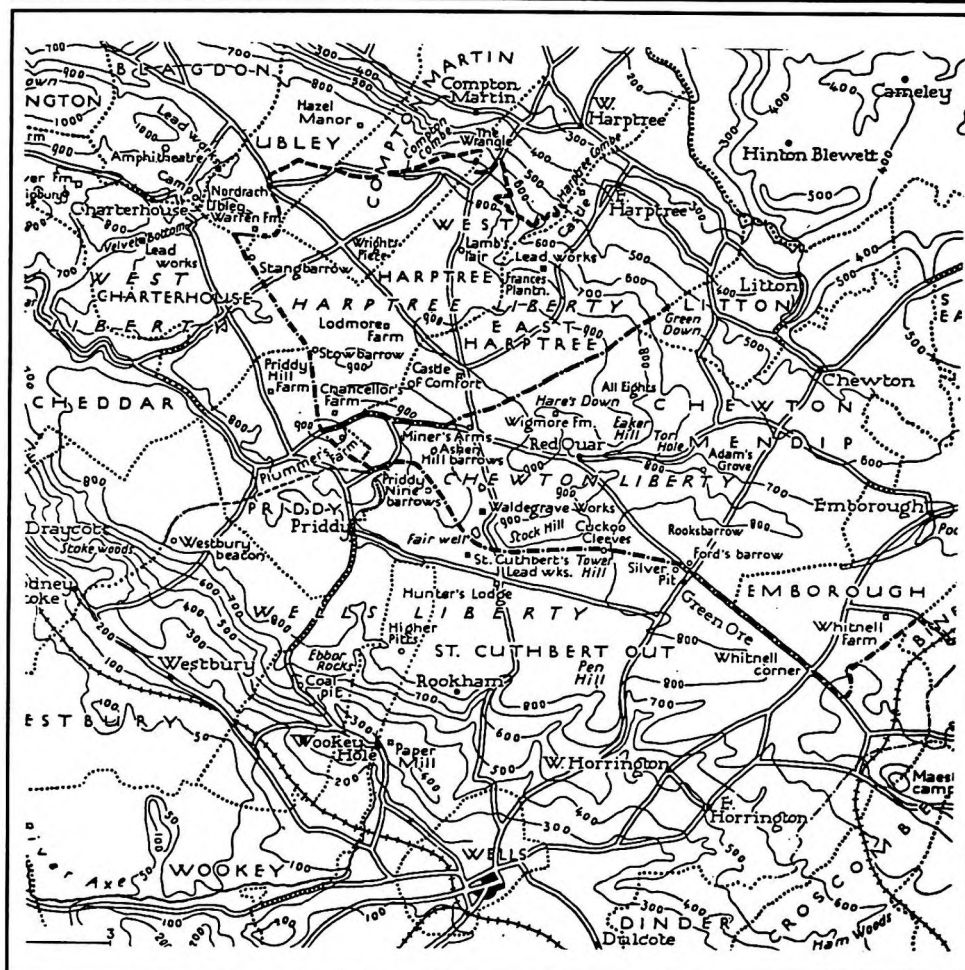
Another parallel to Tolkien's text occurs in the matter of the actual pollution of the water by (orcish?) mining, smelting, etc. As the members of the Fellowship approach the western gate to the way under the Misty Mountains, they discover a new feature, 'a dark still lake ... Neither sky nor sunset were reflected on its sullen surface.' (p. 314) This may be seen to parallel the mid-nineteenth century Mendip water pollution:

It is said that the river Axe in the levels below the hills was so much affected that the stock in the neighbourhood though which the river ran became liable to diseases of the lungs. Fish certainly suffered, and people at Cheddar complained of the way in which their stream ... was made to run 'in a semi-muddy state, objectionable to the sight' ... utterly destructive of all the fish .... Gough (p. 14)

### The loose historical equivalents of Tolkien's dwarves

While any exact British regional equation cannot now be made for the Tolkienian dwarves' multifarious





The Mendip Mining District, showing the boundaries of the Liberties of the Lords Royal, Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map, with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationary Office. While Sanford lies off the map to the west, the main caverns lied under the 'Harptree Liberty' in the upper center of this map.

activities and for the fictional history of their achievement and warring in Moria, it is clear that their lifestyle owes more than a little to the Cornish,<sup>8</sup> and their complex activities parallel in many ways the rise and later eclipse of Roman mining in southwestern Britain. As Pliny reported (*Hist. Nat.* xxxiv, 49), Britain would, and did, become the chief source of lead in the Roman Empire, and the deposits would also yield silver,<sup>9</sup> much as in the First Age mining did in Moria. And much as there were lesser (lead) mines used by the Romans in Flint, Wirksworth in Derbyshire, and Shelve Hill in Shropshire, with the great center at Mendip, so there were dwarf-cities at Erebor and others at Nogrod and Belegost, with the great city at Moria, it being called by the Dwarves themselves *Khazad-dûm*.

Some notion of the believed legendary complexity of the vast Moria mines is gained by the fact that they ran far under the Misty Mountains, occupying the area under Caradhras and the two other peaks.<sup>10</sup> That this fact is to be set against the (imagined) sprawl of the Somerset mines is clear from the above 17th century map reproduced above from Gough.

Any scrutiny of Somerset topographic maps will show

the Mendips to run from the north west near Sandford Hill to the south east, near Shepton Mallett, for some 25 to 30 miles.<sup>11</sup>

### And Hopeless last strands of Mendip men

As much as the dwarves were to be decimated under orcish attacks,<sup>12</sup> so the Mendip men fought valiantly in the hopeless struggle at Sedgemoor in 1685, and again more than a century later, at the time of the French invasion at Fishgard in 1797. Yet despite their terrible sufferings, they remained, as Gough observes, 'notorious not only for the vigour and independence but for the violence and turbulence of their manners.' (p. 17)

### Conclusion

It will be clear from these legendary Somerset vignettes and anecdotes regarding the Mines of Mendip that there was here available for Tolkien a splendid model of ancient mining in England — an industry which had waxed and waned and, if one cares to note, had been marked by the subsequent discovery of its early associated treasure hoards.<sup>13</sup> And as Gough observes (p. 47) 'we do not even know the name by which [the

Romans] called their settlement.'<sup>14</sup> The mystery of the mines and their former glories have haunted all who have speculated about 'the netherworld of Mendip,' and it is now postulated that Tolkien had done just the same thing in his confident and forceful account of the realm of Moria. And who is to say that Tolkien was not fired by some archaeological/antiquarian survey essay like that of Gough, with his challenging farewell to the enigma of the great Roman workings?

When all is told, we know practically nothing of the origins of the industry; under the Romans we catch some glimpses of it, but they are dim and fragmentary ... and years before Honorius withdrew the legions from Britain in 410 complete darkness had once more descended and had blotted it out from our sight (Gough, *op. cit.*, p. 47)

### Appendix

Bram Stoker's story *The Lair of the White Worm* is associated with a legend of Mercia, and with a part of that kingdom with Roman associations. The name of the area near his mercy (i.e. Mercia) farm was 'The Lair of the White Worm' (pp. 39-40), and it was likened to the 'Laidly Worm of Spindleston Heugh' near Bamborough.

*Continued on page 64*