



Kents Cavern Ltd, 91 Ilsham Road, Torquay, Devon, TQ1 2JF  
Tel: 01803 215136

[nickpowe@kents-cavern.co.uk](mailto:nickpowe@kents-cavern.co.uk) [www.kents-cavern.co.uk](http://www.kents-cavern.co.uk)

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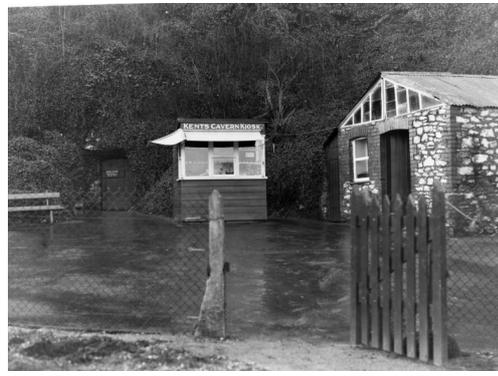
## **Kents Cavern: Britain's most ancient cave home celebrates being privately run for 111 years on St George's Day**



**Kents Cavern 1903**



**Francis Powe**



**Ticket kiosk 1920s**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1903, Francis Powe acquired Kents Cavern, Torquay and 111 years later, the conservation of one of Europe's most important prehistoric cave sites continues in private hands under the responsibility of his great grandson, Nick Powe.

In 1903 Francis already had a strong family connection to the cave. His father-in-law, George Smerdon, had been foreman during the Great Excavation between 1865 and 1880. At the conclusion of this pioneering archaeological endeavour, George became the first custodian. Interest in visiting Kents Cavern grew during Victorian times and Francis began to guide cave tours taking some famous people around including Beatrix Potter and the future King George V as a young prince.

Francis was a carpenter and used the vast underground chambers as a natural workshop for his beach furniture business, supplying boats and bathing huts to the thriving Victorian and Edwardian holiday resort of Torquay. Francis and his son Leslie (Nick's grandfather) installed paths and electric lighting and created the cave route used today. Leslie handed over the reins to Nick's father, John and in 2000 Nick became custodian of a cave that "... holds what are by far the most important known extant Palaeolithic cave deposits in Britain...", according to English Heritage's Ancient Monument scheduling.

Kents Cavern's association with humankind goes back further in time than anywhere else in Britain. Stone tools made by ancient humans are over 500,000 years old. Neanderthals lived here and so did Britain's first early modern humans 41,000 years ago. But it didn't end there. After the

Stone Age, Kents Cavern continued to attract visitors through the ages. Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery was found here and the Victorians found Roman coins placed under a dramatic natural cave formation, resembling a massive human face. Tudor graffiti was left by William Petre in 1571 and in 1688, Robert Hedges inscribed his name, the same year William of Orange landed in nearby Brixham and deposed King James II.

Nick Powe said: "Kents Cavern was never discovered and is well documented in history. Continuing my family's long association with this remarkable English heritage site is a tremendous privilege. We have an obligation to protect the caverns and, as a private business, we are totally dependent on the revenues we generate from our visitors. Traditional tourism has changed over the years and our success has been in reacting quickly to the needs of our existing and new customers.

"Over the next few years I want to strengthen the educational, scientific and cultural offer and to do this we have established the Kents Cavern Foundation whose charitable remit will play a leading role in shaping my vision for a world class "Centre for Prehistory" in Torquay, an Earth heritage and human evolution experience within the framework of an international centre of excellence in earth science education and research.

"I am very proud of what my family has achieved over the last 111 years, as custodians of this exceptional window into Britain's prehistory and as creators of this great British cave attraction. I look forward to delivering the next chapter in the Kents Cavern story."

-ENDS-

## NOTES TO EDITOR

1. *For further information, including filming or for interviews or photography requests please contact Nick Powe by e-mail: [nickpove@kents-cavern.co.uk](mailto:nickpove@kents-cavern.co.uk) or 07973 746383*
2. *Nick Powe has a collection of historical documents, including the original 1903 conveyance deed and photos from 1903 onwards showing the development of Kents Cavern as a visitor attraction.*
3. *The first systematic excavation of the caves was in 1825 by Father John MacEnery, a Roman Catholic priest. He unearthed bones of extinct prehistoric animal. Nothing unusual in that at the time but what was to prove so controversial was that lying next to these buried remains of mammoths, sabre toothed cats, hyenas and other Ice Age animals were stone tools shaped by human hands. Could humans really have lived on earth with these animals? This is controversial enough today but was unimaginable back then, especially for a deeply religious man. MacEnery's findings inspired the Great Excavation of Kents Cavern between 1865 and 1880. This pioneering excavation was masterminded by William Pengelly who employed George Smerdon as his foreman. Pengelly's recordings provided scientific proof for the antiquity of humankind. The archaeological recording technique he invented, a step and grid system, would not be repeated anywhere else for decades.*
4. *Kents Cavern has the highest level of state protection in Britain as a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is a nature conservation site (SSSI). The cave made international headlines in November 2011 when a human jawbone was dated at over 41,000 years old, making it the oldest human fossil in northwestern Europe. The Kents Cavern fossil is on display at the Natural History Museum, London in "**Britain: 1 million years of the human story**"*
5. *Kents Cavern is recognised by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) as a key gateway site for the English Riviera Global Geopark, a designation awarded to 100 territories across the world with outstanding geology and high cultural heritage value.*

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