

Nottingham – ‘the house of caves’



Detail from map of Nottingham by John Speed, 'The countie of Nottingham described'; 1610. University of Nottingham EMSC Not 1.B8.C76

*Tales
from the
Caves*

Exploring
Nottingham's
underground stories



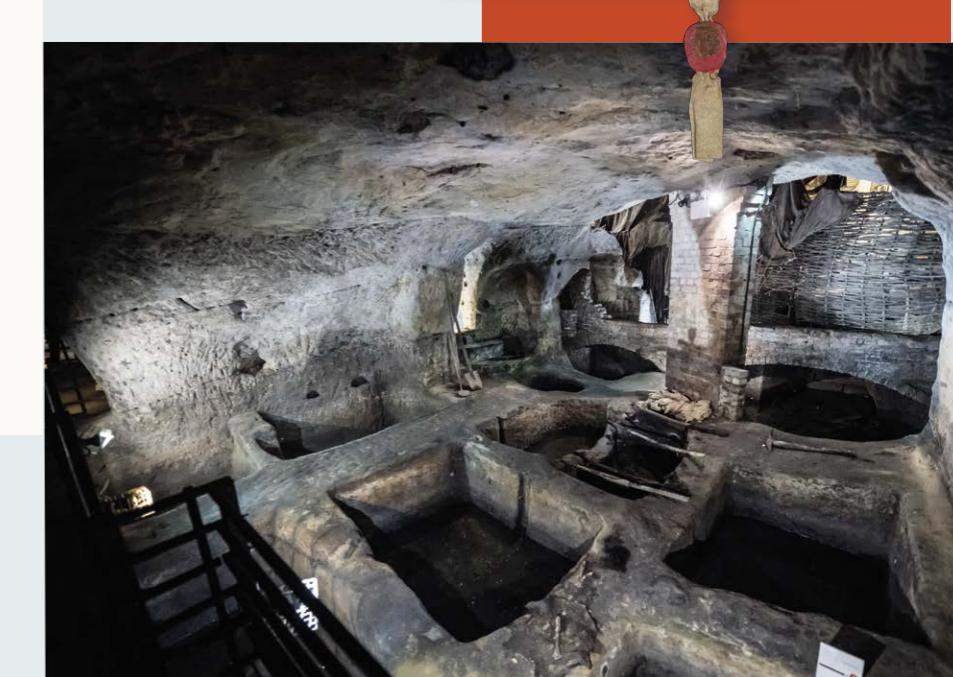
The association between Nottingham and caves goes back to the earliest recorded history of the town. Asser, in his *Life of Alfred* (c.893) refers to the Viking Great Army overwintering at Nottingham and gives the Welsh and Latin names for the settlement as *Tig Guocobauc* and *Speluncarum Domus*, both of which may be translated as ‘house of caves’.

It is possible that some caves in Nottingham do go back to the Anglo-Saxon period (c.400-1066), although the earliest archaeological evidence for caves in the city is from the thirteenth century. They take a range of different forms: from relatively simple single chambers reached by stairs and a passageway; to systems of multiple connecting spaces, with larger spans supported by rock-cut pillars, sometimes on two or more levels. Caves frequently appear in medieval deeds from the fourteenth century onwards, and in entries in the records of the Borough Court of the town. Many medieval properties had underground cellars (celarium subteraneum) or spaces ‘beneath the rock’ – *sub rupe* in Latin. They were used to store a wide range of goods such as ale, wine and hay; they often contained wells and kilns and were being used as stables and pigsties. Caves are often mentioned in disputes over nuisances to public order, such as the illicit dumping of dung and refuse.

Some of the caves dug into the cliff face at the Broad Marsh and the Narrow Marsh were used as workshops for tanning leather. The tanners were a wealthy craft group in medieval Nottingham, but this was a smelly and unpleasant trade which required animal skins to be soaked in rock-cut pits filled with noxious materials. Tanners were often brought before the Borough Court for polluting the town’s watercourses.

This grant specifically refers to a dwelling ‘super rupem’ [over the rock], suggesting there are also properties below. Grant, Agnes Denteth to William Ode. Location: Nottingham; 22 December 1402. University of Nottingham Mi D 784

Bottom image: Photograph of a tannery cave beneath the former Broadmarsh centre. The rock-cut pits were used for tanning animal skins into leather. Andrew Marlow Hallsworth; 2022



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