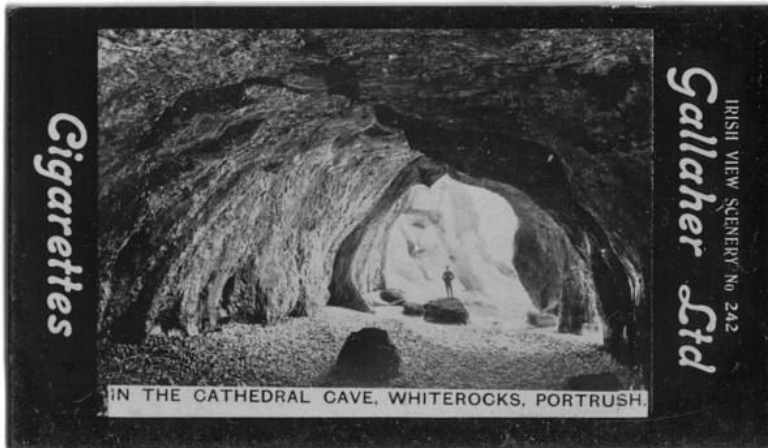


## Great Sea Caves of Antrim "The Ghost of Cathedral Cave" by Andy McInroy

*..a musician was surprised by the rising tide, and it pursuing, he retreating, and playing as he went, he became lost forever to sight, but not to hearing - for still, they say, can be heard Jackson's unearthly music, sounding faintly miles and miles inland.*

Titan, A Monthly Magazine, Volume XXIV Published 1857, James Hogg & Sons



There are many historical accounts of vast and inaccessible sea caves on the North Antrim coast, but I had never ventured to find them. However, in 2007 I discovered a century-old cigarette card of a Cathedral Cave at White Rocks near Portrush. The old card gave me the inspiration to look a little harder and to try to recreate a modern day version of the mysterious old photograph. Little did I know that this card would become the starting point on a much longer journey to photograph many more of Antrim's mighty sea caves.

The 1908 Gallaher cigarette card which inspired my project.  
Photographer unknown

The limestone cliffs of the White Rocks near Portrush are difficult to access with only a few safe descents. Furthermore, the tidal swells around the cliff base make exploration hazardous. To photograph safely, I waited for the right conditions. I needed good weather with a low sea swell. I also needed to wait for a low spring tide to give me time to navigate the headlands.



Location of Cathedral Cave



On a fine September morning, I climbed cautiously down an eroding gully and followed the tide out and around the headland. Before long I was standing at the mouth of Cathedral Cave, 100 yards deep and at least 30 feet high at its entrance. As I ventured inside I felt like an explorer discovering the lost city of gold, a place that every boy and girl should visit.

I tried to stand close to the position that the old photograph was taken. It was apparent that some rockfall and erosion had occurred in the 100 years since the original was taken but the cave was remarkably familiar. This is quite surprising when you consider that the cave has been subject to over 70,000 high tides and a century of Atlantic storms. To bring the photo into the 21st century I used a modern digital technique called High Dynamic Range (HDR) photography to peer deep into the shadows of the cave.

On seeing my first photograph of the Cathedral Cave, I felt that my recreation lacked a sense of scale. It needed a figure perched on the rock. For fun, I digitally copied the old figure from the Gallahers cigarette card into the recreation, taking care to maintain the correct scale by using the rock below as a reference.



The playful manipulation intrigued me. The figure looks ghostlike in this version and, of course, the person is long deceased. It got me thinking about who this person was and how they might feel about being transported 100 years in time, from an old cigarette card into a 21st century recreation.

After making this photograph, I felt myself returning to the ghostly figure again and again. I now realise that the purpose of the person in the photograph is not just about giving scale. The figure also illustrates how short our own time is relative to this ancient geological picture frame.

The Ghost of Cathedral Cave © Andy McInroy

The figure is not a real ghost of course, but a photographic one. Perhaps we all become ghosts every time our photo is taken, captured like phantoms within the frame.

Inspired by these thoughts, I returned 6 months later to photograph myself on the rock using a tripod and timed release. Here it is. Not a cheat this time but a real, modern day, photographic ghost. I hope that one day, perhaps another 100 years from now, some person might continue the story and stand to be photographed in this secret hall.



Cathedral Cave self-portrait © Andy McInroy

### Update April 2009 - The Mystery of the Great Column

I have come across this curious old postcard which shows a "Great Column" in Cathedral Cave. I initially assumed that this column was the same one which still exists there today. However, I visited the cave again and was puzzled to find that I could not recreate this viewpoint. It appears that this huge column has collapsed since the old photograph was taken and now lies as a huge jumble of massive blocks in the cave mouth.



The Great Column, Cathedral Cave Postcard by Hartmann, c1900

This postcard goes some way to explaining the main differences between the Gallaher cigarette card and my own photographs. For example, it explains where the blocks in the cave mouth came from. This is confirmed by the old photograph by Robert J. Welch (below), which also shows the original Great Column intact. When I originally discovered this photograph last year, I thought it may have been a darkroom mistake where two negatives were laid over each other during the printing process. I can now see that Robert Welch was using flash photography (or some other form of light painting) which is why the column appears so bright

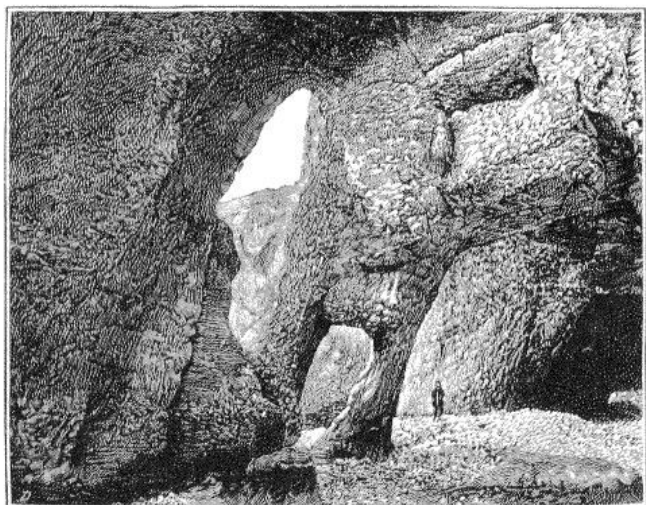
.These old photographs also explain the old descriptions of Cathedral Cave which state that the cave features "a roof supported by two massive columns at its seaward end". It might be frightening to consider that the roof is now supported by a single column !



Before and after the collapse of The Great Column Left image Robert Welch c1900, Right image Andy McInroy 2007

### Update June 2009

I have discovered an old etching in a French Journal, *la Nature*, dated 1896. The paper in which the etching appears was written by the visiting French cave scientist, Édouard-Alfred Martel. It has been incorrectly captioned, the 'Fern Cave, Larrybane'. What it actually shows is the view into the Cathedral Cave and clearly shows how the two great columns were joined together, with the arch between them. Édouard-Alfred Martel is considered by many to be the father of modern speleology. I find it fascinating to now discover that this famous cave explorer visited the great Cathedral Cave.



Cathedral Cave Pillars, *La Nature*, 1896 In a paper written by Édouard-Alfred Martel

Our thanks to Andy for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters. If you would like to discuss further with Andy his research please email him at [andrew.mcinroy@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.mcinroy@gmail.com).

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