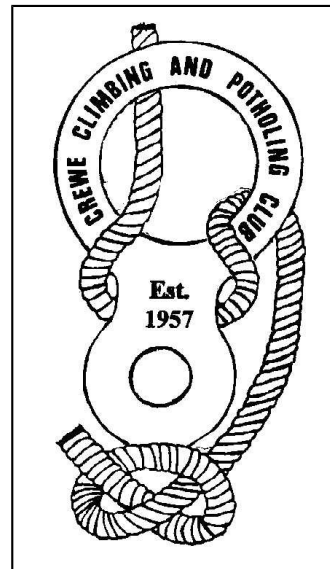


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News from China.

Exciting news from Tianxing - a few days ago Duncan and Marcel Nawrot, pushing from camp at -630m in Lanmu Shu Dong, connected to Qikeng Dong. With last year's Lanmu Shu to Liuchi Aokou Xia Dong connection this forms a 19,024m long system which is 983m deep from the LCAKX entrance to Qikeng's terminal sump.

Octave Aven, Trousers and Whitewalls Camp

This year we rigged down Octave Aven, but instead of going to the Dismal Ending dig, Rob bolted a route down the other 'trouser leg' of the shaft. This landed on a boulder slope with the very muddy Trousers Rift going off. Trousers dropped a further 110m to a surprisingly complex network of fossil passages 10-30m above the active level in Lanmu Shu. Dunks and Marcel established a cosy camp here and then pushed on to Qikeng, connecting to the muddy side-lead near where Keep the Faith meets the Qikeng main streamway. In total they surveyed over 600m at that level, and Andy Zellner, Ashley Chan and I brought the total up to almost a kilometre during the next camp. There are numerous pitches down where the LMS water can be heard, and it looks like there are horizontal continuations over a few of them, but they would require long bolt traverses/climbs. If you look at the survey in Aven, it's now a massive tangle of passages, which I think gives a good idea of how much more passage we can expect to find at this sort of level.

Qikeng - Dongba

With a camp near to the Qikeng streamway, we took the opportunity to go downstream to try for the elusive connection to Dongba at Momentary Lapse of Reason. On the camp before the derig began, Duncan and Rob rigged down the 60m Dragon's Mouth pitch in the main streamway and made their way to Momentary Lapse. Here they found static pools was about 8m higher than in 2002, sumping both the swimming duck and the crawl in Momentary Lapse. However, the raised water levels gave a leg-up on climbs into an upper level which bypassed the two sumps, enabling them to reach the pushing front. Here they rigged a traverse and then dropped a small pitch, expecting to land in Dongba. At the bottom the passage continued for some 60m to a 30m-long pool which was sumped at the end, the draught going up a climb that needs bolts. None of this corresponded to Duncan's recollection of Naked Desire (the passage they'd been hoping to connect to), but there was a good chance that Naked Desire lay on the other side of the climb. They were just about to

unpack the bolting kit when the cave suddenly made two deep, ominous booming noises. Unsure of the source of the booms, they beat a retreat. It was gutting to get so close to the connection (again) and not make it, but I think there's every chance that we'll be able to make the connection in the future.

Zuan Yan Keng

In Zuan Yan Keng the bad rock made progress difficult, but with long thru bolts we were able to get down to about -250m, and it looks like we've now broken into a band of better rock.

Zuan Yan Keng and Lanmu Shu are now completely derigged. For the remainder of the expedition we're going to be focusing on a few other shafts, including Su Jia Ba (Wet Sink), which is unusually dry this year and looks very interesting.

Cheers, Erin.(**You saw it here first (thanks to Jenny D.!)**)

Caves and Cavities in the Upper Lathkill Catchment (Part 1) (12th May 2006)

This is an area which still has enormous potential for the discovery of extensive cave passages. Known systems are either fragmentary high level passages which are eventually choked with glacial clay (Water Icicle), extensive flat out crawls close to, or beneath, the normal water level (Lathkill Head Cave, Lower Cales Dale Cave, Critchlow Cave), or isolated, high, probably fault-influenced chambers (Lathkill Hall, Waiting Room, Garden Path). The Water Icicle passages may well be part of an ancient drainage route towards the current Lathkill Dale valley, and it is likely that open passage exists above the current known systems which resurge at valley floor level, however the access is likely to be buried.

This walk was undertaken to seek, and investigate, potential dig sites in the area between Cascade Cavern and Caves Dale, following the southern rim of Lathkill Dale. Known sites are listed for completeness.

1. Cascade Cavern [SK 15726640]:

The lidded entrance is at the top of the slope behind the toilet building at the head of Lathkill Dale, close to the Monyash to Bakewell road. An opening between concrete sleepers leads immediately into, and through, a large metal water tank (beware jagged edges) jammed into the top of a wide shaft. A pitch of 12 metres lands on the top of a steep slope of rubble and farm debris, leading down into a large, natural chamber, with an inlet high on the left. In the opposite direction, a mined passage leads under dangerous, stacked deads, into an area of unstable workings, with a dangerous false floor on rotten timbers. Down the steep slope (handline useful) the roof lowers to walking height, and on the right is a steep, descending passage to a clay choke (being dug intermittently). Ahead, the main passage crosses a mined shaft in the floor, excavated to a blind face at 5 metres depth, but now completely refilled, and ends just beyond in a series of small worked out mineral pockets.

2. Lathkill Head – Garden Path Entrance [SK 16506598]:

A lidded entrance in the triangular field, just north of the ascending track from Lathkill Dale towards One Ash Grange, gives access to a small block-walled chamber, with a second, locked, inner lid. Entry to the pitches below is strictly controlled.

Just below the northern edge of the field are two small quarries, almost opposite the steps down into the dale from Ricklow Quarry:

3. Fox Cub Cave [SK 16556600]

In the back wall of the eastern quarry, foxes have excavated part of a clay-filled passage, with a water worn roof and phreatic pendants. The current opening is about 0.6 metres wide and 0.27 metres high, with a clay floor. There was a slight, cool outward draft. A second,

much smaller hole, at the same level but about 5 metres further right was also drafting slightly.

The next important feature is reached after crossing the bottom of an obvious valley:

4. Lathkill Head – Top Entrance [SK 16716596]

A lidded entrance, at the foot of the sloping field immediately above the steep drop down into the Dale, secured by a nut and bolt. A short, walled shaft (which can be free-climbed) drops to a constriction, and a further short descent to the head of the 20 metre pitch into the well-decorated 'Waiting Room' chamber. [33 metre rope, rigged from surface belay].

Following the fence line along the valley rim, a group of pine trees is reached, forming a small copse, high above Lathkill Head Cave, which is the wet-weather resurgence of the River Lathkill. Several features were noted :

5. Badger Rift [SK 17006585]

Midway through the pines, and about 5 metres down, there is a hidden cleft, about 2 metres high and 0.3 metres wide, running back parallel to the cliff face from a vertical overlap of the cliff. Despite the difficult access, the rift was being used by badgers.

6. Jackdaw Rift [SK 17056585]

5 metres beyond Badger Rift, and just before a barbed wire fence running to the cliff edge, an opening can be seen just below the top of the cliff, at the upper limit of a vertical gully. The opening is 0.6 metres wide, and 0.3 metres high, with an earth and rubble floor. Approaching from the steep slope below, an open, natural rift can be seen, directly below the hole noted above. The rift, easily identified by a jammed block halfway up, is about 2 metres high, 0.3 metres wide at the top and 0.5 metres wide at the base, with an earth and rubble floor. There is an old Jackdaw's nest, well back, at the top of the rift.

Following the line of the rift, a similar rift can be seen, apparently partially choked with rocks, on the opposite side of the Dale, at a slightly lower altitude, and running in the same direction.

7. Buttress Rift [SK 17136585]

Just beyond the fence line, an obvious path can be seen, running towards a rock buttress, just below the rim of the Dale. A natural rift, 1.5 metres high and 0.2 metres wide cuts into the cliff face. The rift widens towards the clay filled base, and a slight outward draft was noted. Just beyond, a narrow slot runs right through the buttress.

Away from the copse, the next feature is the obvious cut of a series of workings along a lead vein:

8. Holmes Groove [SK 17266558]

The first feature on the vein is a shaft-mound about 50 metres out into the field above the southern rim of the Dale, with a further probable shaft site at the field boundary.

Moving down the slope:

-Top Adit: Three Hawthorn Trees around a rock outcrop mark the location of a partially obstructed entrance. A triangular opening, 0.75 metres wide and 0.75 metres high, gives access to a low, earthy crawl between boulders for 2.5 metres. The passage appears to continue beyond.

-Hazel Adit: 10 metres below Top Adit, a Hazel tree marks a second triangular opening, 0.5 metres wide and 0.5 metres high, between rock walls. A wriggle down the earth-slope entrance gives access to a low crawl for 2 metres, with the passage appearing to continue beyond.

-Boulder Adit: Further down the slope, an obvious cutting leads out onto a significant, grassed-over, spoil tip. Large boulders block the most likely access point to the adit. There are other features below, all apparently blocked, and at the foot of the slope is an obvious run-in adit or sough, which was discharging a considerable stream through the loose fill. All other up-stream resurgences, including Lathkill Head Cave, were dry on this day. The

vein could also be traced up the opposite (north-east) slope of the dale, by a series of choked workings, to the west of the path up to Haddon Grove Farm.

Beyond Holmes Groove the main south-western slope of the dale becomes increasingly wooded and overgrown, and despite searching the vertical jungle, I failed to find One Ash Shelter [SK 17306556]. In the area was:

9. Badger Terrace: [SK 17326552]

Halfway down a vegetated cliff, close to a large, fallen Ash tree, badgers have excavated a series of entrances along a steep, narrow terrace, into an earth filled rift or bedding plane. Following the hillside round into Cales Dale, high up, at the top of the west facing slope is a low, limestone cliff:

10. Cales Dale Crawl: [SK17306550]

Below the northern end of the upper cliff, is a low, arched entrance, about 1 metre wide. The passage, clearly natural, is almost filled with clay, but it is possible to see at least 2 metres back through the 0.3 metre high entrance. 'Caves of The Peak District', page 182, mentions this passage as possibly connecting to the next site:

11. Cales Dale Cave (Upper): [SK 17306544]

To the left of the previous site, a superb, stooping height, entrance, gives access to a fine natural passage, which reduces to a flat out crawl after about 15 metres. Apparently the passage divides 23 metres from the entrance, with both routes being blocked. The right-hand branch 'may' lead to site 10, above.

There is no doubt that some of these locations would be worth digging, however it is important to note that most of Lathkill Dale and Cales Dale are designated as a National Nature Reserve, under the guardianship of English Nature, and official permission would need to be obtained before any work commenced.

Colin 'Steve' Knox, 16th May 2006

Cwmorthin 12 November 2006

Having a couple of new faces to take on an underground adventure Jim and I decided that a round trip into this behemoth of Welsh slate quarries would be the ideal way to give them a gentle introduction into the darkness beneath; no ladders, SRT, crawls and squeezes to contend with, just the pleasure of the experience to enjoy. Following a bit of web research and making some contacts, a local explorer who had been with us on the Croeseor – Rhosydd through trip agreed to come along to help with the navigation and photography, together with another explorer who wanted to learn more of this massive working. With the team settled a date was decided upon, kit was gathered and arrangements made.

JimS, SteveM, SimonRL, JennyW, IzzyB-C and I duly arrived at Tan-y-Grisau following a false start (forgotten wellies), and after a brief round of introductions we changed into our mine exploration gear of boiler suits and furries, topped off with a waterproof jacket for the walk up the hill in the typical welsh drizzle. We duly arrived at the Smoke Flue entrance, above and behind the ruined mine buildings. As it was now 11.00 we observed our two minutes silence, gazing across the rocky waste tips to the beauty of Llyn Cwmorthin and the Moelwyns.

On with our lamps and we were ready for the off! The well ginged Smoke Flue entrance rapidly led to a collapse where bed rock was met and a quick squirm up the mud into the breakdown chamber was followed by a climb back down to the level under old timbers and ankle deep water. We followed the level along to where the water ran down into a chamber, with other levels leading off. A damp scramble down on the right led us to the next floor (Lake Level) and the remains of the Old Vein Incline (OVI) winder. Here we left our waterproofs to be collected on our return and descended the rubblely OVI itself, one of several routes to the lower levels. At the first floor down we turned right through a low section to follow A-level to the first chamber. Here there were the remains of a good slate stair that led us down to C

floor through a large and gloomy working. At the base we again went right along a generous haulage level until we came to a mini version of the Millwr Tunnels "Railway of Death" that ended at a low retaining wall on a T junction. Bearing left here led us to a void on the junction of several passages, including a degraded manway in the floor. This was descended via an in situ alloy builder's ladder which has a good wobble and twist – be prepared! This was followed by the remains of a wooden stair, equipped with a dubious handline, but this bit was easily descended without the need of fixed aids.

We emerged into the top of a chamber behind a pair of old boilers that the miners had reused as water tanks, a large tea urn, and at the bottom some concrete bases for air compressors. We were now on the Oakeley / Cwmorthin D-E floor, and at this point we left the round trip for an extended explore. Our spare kit and tackle bags were dropped here, and we wandered off to the east into the blackness, passing various side turns and chambers, some with blue white copper calcite, others with dubious timbering and one with a ruinous incline down to the so called "Timbered Tunnel of Death" – an extremely worrying section of passage that was luckily well off our route. After negotiating collapses and what are thought to be the largest man excavated (non-machine) chambers in the world we arrived at the bizarre sight of a Victorian promenade staircase zigzagging up into the gloom.

We abandoned DE floor and up we went, but sadly this elegant style only lasted one floor. From here we entered the base of a partly backfilled chamber with the remains of modern electric lighting at its foot. Loins girded we followed Simon up into the darkness. This was a particularly evil 180 foot pile of loose choss and rubble, with luckily for us most of the big dodgy bits already towards the bottom and finer scree higher up. Near the top we managed to escape the interminable scree onto a good wooden staircase. This led us up to what had in recent years been a show mine, but ongoing quarrying had forced to close. We spent a good time exploring all the accessible passages, looking at the slate information boards and the now decayed animated mannequins that had been posed around. For me the most bizarre and thrilling part was looking out of the old entrance into daylight and a working quarry on the other side of the mountain. Having seen our fill we returned to our gear at the bottom of the man way for a late lunch. The tip was just as evil going down, except looking down it meant our beginner could see just how awfully big and nasty it really was.

From the boilers we headed west and soon came to the Chamber 34 (or the Oakeley DI, if you prefer) incline winder. Here an incline plunges from our DE floor, all the way down to floor I. The mine used to go all the way to floor R, but is now flooded to H I am told. After pausing here we took a stooping passage to the right of the incline that soon enlarged and passed through various chambers with cabans and working areas for the servicing of pumps and motors, and winding around we came to a mismatch in floor levels.

Here we dropped a couple of feet on to Lefel Ffrench, a part of DE floor, and continued on passing various manways leading down and chambers leading up until we came to the water. This was draining away down an ochre stained manway, whose rocky lip was causing standing water in the level. The water was cool but only thigh deep, and we waded past the bottom of an incline and abandoned trucks, some loaded with collapsible cranes and pulley blocks, to reach another large chamber containing the well preserved remains of an incline winder and the flooded DG incline itself.

From here we retreated a few yards and ascended the steep Back Vein Incline, which we followed all the way up to Lake Level. On the ascent we passed several other floors but left exploring them for another day. On the incline itself there are a couple of well wedged mine trucks that have jumped the rails, as well as a large water tank that has been pushed down from the top. After a pause to catch our breath we nipped through the lake level workings to the OVI to retrieve our coats, and then out into the dusk through the new gate that has recently been installed on the portal. A tired amble down the track led us back to the cars after a brief 6 hours rambling around the workings. Once changed we dashed off to the pub –

purely to re-hydrate you understand. All told it was an excellent trip but with hindsight I don't think that heap of rubble and choss was too bright an idea for a beginner, but luckily we got away with it this time.

NOTE – Only try and visit the far reaches on a Sunday or if you can guarantee no blasting in the active quarry, to be here during a blow down would be a “very bad thing”

References: www.aditnow.co.uk/default.aspx. www.mine-explorer.co.uk/
Brian Edmonds.

Minera Mine, Nr. Wrexham, North Wales. (14th October 2006)

This was a Darren Conde 'special'! Darren has a sneaky habit of finding places that no-one else in the Club has ever heard of, never mind visited, and this was one of those.

We headed out to Wrexham, round the by-pass onto the A483, then off on the A525 west through Coedpoeth. Branch left onto the B5426 to Minera, turning right at the small triangular green, up the hill past the church, then left into the quarry approach road, and finally parking at the end near a barrier of huge limestone blocks [SJ 259 520].

The party comprised: Darren Conde, Len Kirkham, Colin Knox, Colin Mills, John Preston, and John Shenton.

The whole area has been heavily worked for minerals, both below ground, in the many interconnecting mines, and on the surface in the huge quarries, but the industries are now mostly closed, although some quarries are still active nearby.

We changed and headed off through a gateway on the left (south side) of the parking area, towards a private house and building project, which was clearly an on-going conversion of disused station and mine buildings. The public footpath we were using followed the track-bed of the disused mineral railway, back towards the east, along the foot of a densely wooded slope. A plan on page 74 of 'MINERA Lead Mines and Quarries', published by Wrexham Maelor Borough Council in 1995, shows over thirty shafts in the immediate area, either side of the railway, but without a better plan it is difficult to be sure exactly which shafts are which ! After a couple of hundred metres Darren led us off, up-slope to the right, to a hole in a shallow hollow against a small rock cliff, all surrounded by overhanging trees, and fenced off for safety. This, we believe, is 'Cabin Shaft', and was to be our route into the workings below. Leaving our gear, we wandered on across the slope, passing a shaft mound, and into a hollow with huge, stone, lime kilns, looking like Aztec ruins lost in the undergrowth. The battery of three kilns, known as the Atcherley Kilns (SJ26005017) were built by 1840. Climbing the bank beyond, we reached another leafy hollow, where a little digging revealed a metal lid in a shaft cap. Eventually we levered the rusted lid up, and were able to look down a shaft fitted with iron ladders, although the condition of the ladders was not good enough to risk a descent. Perhaps we'll rig this shaft on our next trip. It is likely to be 'Footway Shaft'. Returning to Cabin Shaft, we had a look at the shaft mound passed earlier, and found there was an enormous open shaft there, surrounded by barbed wire. The shaft was oval in section, with a lining of dressed stone blocks, although the lining was partially collapsed at one side, and a large concrete base alongside showed that this had clearly been a major engine shaft. Looking at the plan (mentioned above) this is likely to be 'Boundary Shaft', although the Clwyd Metal Mines Survey entry on the internet does not seem to match exactly as it mentions a horse whim circle, rather than an engine platform. (Perhaps we were lost !!)

The Clwyd Metal Mines Survey records:

Minera Boundary Shaft - SJ26125182. Lead/Silver (1864-1919)

CPAT Historic Environment Record No. 104367.

The shaft is located at SJ26125182 with its horse whim circle in an area of woodland much disturbed by mining, on the south side of the disused Mineral Railway. The area bears the scars of earlier mining, visible as shallow workings, now covered in dense vegetation. The 19th century shafts in the area can be identified as the Cornish Shaft at SJ20205180, immediately alongside a siding on the mineral railway, being fenced off and having caving access, the Busy Bee at SJ26165176 and the adjacent Royle's, and Grand Turk at SJ26305170, where a chimney base and stonework remains of the winding engine house are hidden in the undergrowth.

It is interesting to see that in 1992-1993 when the Mines Survey was carried out, it was the 'Cornish Shaft' which was being used as caver access. Boundary Shaft marked the north-western extremity of the Minera Mines workings on the Main Vein and Red Vein. In 1919, the shaft was re-opened and worked the North Vein until 1933, using a whim for winding. Ladders were used for man access.

Back to the trip. We returned to the shaft we think was Cabin Shaft, and rigged an SRT rope from two convenient trees. Entry requires a backwards walk down an earth slope, and then a slither over the edge of a mucky hole between rotting, and semi-collapsed timbers. The rope requires protection at the lip. Below, a simple descent of about 7 or 8 metres, partly against the wall, lands on an earthy mound in a spacious passage. The obvious, open route leads immediately into the upper part of a large chamber, with some attractive flowstone deposits along the lip of a terrace, overhanging the lower section, down to the right. The domed roof was notable, being made up of narrow, alternating bands of light and dark rock, like a Bassett's Allsort ! We called it 'Bertie's Chamber', just to confuse matters.

We abandoned all SRT kit , and wandered off down a steeply sloping passage which led away from 'Bertie's' to the lower levels. As notes were not taken during the trip, it is impossible to give a clear description of our route, but it was reasonably obvious, and any wrong turns seemed to enter worked our spaces, often well stacked with miners' waste. In places the route led between packs of waste rock, and there were many short timbers set as roof supports. A crawl led through to intersect a stope part-way up, which was like a great vertical slot through the strata. Large quantities of waste rock could be seen perched, like inverted pyramids, on single timbers, jammed horizontally between the walls, and it was a reminder that apparently solid floors needed to be treated with respect ! We continued our exploration, crawling under an enormous detached roof slab, which was supported by packs on either side, and by partially squashed timber uprights.

Throughout, there had been numerous places where narrow mineral veins could be examined in the walls and roof, and as expected, these were mostly lead and its associated minerals, however, at one point there were traces of bright green, which I assume must have been copper. Some sections of wall showed complex mineral mixtures, with individual blocks of Galena (lead ore) showing clearly. Some blocks were the size of modern, domestic building bricks, and it is difficult to understand why they were not extracted by the mine. Darren led us to a short drop over a timbered edge, where we were able to descend, using an in-situ hand-line, to a lower level with more mineral lined pockets. One amazing piece of timber here was covered in brown hairy fungus, like Orang-utan fur ! All passages up to this point seemed to be through worked out mineral areas, but the next section was clearly a link passage through barren ground, being walking height with an arched top, and with waste rock stacked along one side.

A short crawl, over debris from the base of a blocked shaft in the roof of the passage, led through to a narrow ledge around the side of a huge shaft, at least 3 metres in diameter. Leaning out and looking down it was possible to see the upper part of a ladder way at least 15 metres below, but it was impossible to see the shaft base clearly, or anything much above the overhanging roof over the ledge. A section of metal pipework, either for pumping or for compressed air, stands vertically in the shaft, but is not secured. We headed off to the left, beyond the shaft, and explored more passages and workings similar to those already seen before turning back. I crawled up a low passage on the left when leaving the ledge round the shaft, and entered another labyrinth of passages, passing a semi-collapsed shaft with hand lines rigged. Darren, Len and Colin M. explored this area, while I caught up with John P. and John S. who were returning to the main chamber.

After a refreshment break, the three of us set off into the lower section of 'Bertie's', taking plenty of photographs of the superb flowstone formations and straw stalactites. The lime working above has contributed to the rapid growth of these formations, some of which cover miners' walls which are probably less than 150 years old. In several places the cream and white formations have been stained a vivid red colour by ferrous deposits in the rock. We followed a series of unnecessarily large yellow arrows, which led us round a circular route through many chambers and passages. At one point we passed directly below a shaft which opened to daylight. The shaft was square at the base, but round at the top, where it was surrounded by overhanging ferns under a canopy of trees. Further on, John P. climbed up a short, partially collapsed, wooden ladder, into a chamber which led through to the base of the entrance shaft on the opposite side to the route we had followed. Following our 'arrowed route', we rejoined the main chamber, just as the others arrived back, having explored a route which led much deeper into the mine.

We all exited without difficulty, despite the horrendous condition of the timbers supporting the opening, which, of course, were much more obvious from below! A short search of the woodland brought us to the fern-fringed shaft-top which was surrounded by a couple of strands of barbed wire. Although open, the stone lining at the top was not sound enough to make a descent a safe proposition. I am uncertain which shaft this is on the plan of the area, and it really needs a sunny afternoon with a large scale map and a GPS to try to identify the shafts properly. Once changed, Darren insisted that we all walk round the whole of the quarry area, so he could point out all the other holes, both mined and natural that he has located, and finally we examined the vast Hoffman lime-burning kiln which is partially buried in the middle of the quarry floor at SJ 256502.

This was a brilliant day, in a totally new area, requiring minimal SRT, and only a boiler suit, as the whole mine was dust dry! Thanks Darren.

Colin 'Steve' Knox. 20th November 2006

A further visit to Minera Mine, Nr. Wrexham, North Wales (6th December 2006)

See the previous article, dated 14th October 2006, for details of the approach route. Once again, we parked near the barrier of huge limestone blocks [SJ 259 520], at the end of the track which leads into the landscaped quarry site. After the rain of the previous week, the river next to the car-park had grown from a sluggish trickle to a fast-flowing torrent, several metres wide, roaring over a stone barrier.

The party comprised: Darren Conde, Colin Knox, and Paul Nixon.

We intended to use the Cabin Shaft route, and were not particularly surprised to find that part of the floor of the leaf-filled hollow, containing the entrance, had disappeared down the shaft since our previous visit !

Darren rigged the SRT rope from a couple of convenient trees, and disappeared over the timbered lip of the shaft opening. Paul and I followed without difficulty. The pitch is about 6 or 7 metres deep, with the descent mostly against the wall, landing on a pile of earth and rotten timbers from the collapsing shaft covering. This is not a place to linger.

A few metres of spacious passage leads directly into 'Bertie's Chamber', an enormous worked out void, where we left our SRT kit in an alcove, close to a blackboard used to record any party entering the mine.

There are areas of good formations here, produced by the lime-rich water percolating down from the lime kilns and waste tips overhead. One particular slab of rock has a formation which is exactly like a petrified octopus ! Similar groups of rubbery-looking 'fingers' are close by, and may have developed from fallen straw stalactites, although it is difficult to see how.

Darren led off, down into the western workings, following a series of steep rubble-covered slopes downwards, with the route marked by huge yellow arrows. We investigated a number of side passages and chambers, mostly used for the disposal of waste rock, then turned away from the 'tourist circuit' into an area Darren had visited on a previous trip. This is a hugely complex area, with horizontal passages and vein cavities, on many levels, linked by short sloping access routes. We reached several points where vertical shafts intersected the workings, all with water cascading from above which made it impossible to see anything by looking up. A good survey is needed to enable these shafts to be correctly identified, and matched up to surface locations. Internal shafts were also seen, mostly choked with waste rock, which was probably tipped in intentionally, rather than as the result of collapse.

Most passages are easy, walking height, but eventually we reached a section where we had to crawl through a low, sandy section, before breaking out into more spacious workings again. Side passages radiate in all directions, including up and down, but most are dead-ends, where narrow bands of mineral can still be seen in the roof and walls. Much of this looks like really old working, with little evidence of shot-firing. Surprisingly, there are places where substantial lumps of Galena (lead ore) can still be seen in situ, exposed in a matrix of Calcite and other minerals.

Following the most obvious passage onwards, we reached a point where we could scramble down into a horizontal passage, with standing water. Darren informed us that this was the Maes-y-Ffynnon Drainage Adit. I believe this adit was driven in the late eighteenth century, to capture the water entering the western end of the mine workings through fissures which connected with the adjacent, natural, Ogof Llyn Ddu cave system. Splashing along for some distance we reached a left turn into a narrow passage, cut against a superb, vertical, 'slicken-sided' wall. (The movement of opposing masses of rock, either side of a joint or fault, under phenomenal pressure, has produced a highly polished surface, like marble).

The slicken-sided passage led to a small chamber which ended at a tiny hole. The whole area had taken on a different character, being much less like a mine, and far more like a natural cave. Undaunted, Darren set off through the floor-level hole into a flat-out, body-tight squeeze, which seemed to be about three metres long. I followed, and found that, although awkward, it was not as bad as it looked. The squeeze opened into a larger chamber with a low, wet passage ahead, almost immediately blocked by a jumble of huge boulders, apparently collapsed from above. Darren was sure this was the way through into Ogof Llyn Du, sadly, no longer passable without a major digging effort. Returning through the squeeze was not easy. I ended up going through feet first, dragging my helmet and lamp, and still found it intimidating.

Back in the Maes-y-Ffynnon Adit, we headed off past our entry point into the adit, to the opposite end, where a gravel bank partially blocked the way on. Crawling over, led

immediately into deeper water, with the adit stretching away into the distance. As we were using dry gear (boiler suits), we retreated, rather than get soaked.

Retracing our route, we explored more of the side chambers and passages, at one point looking out into a wet shaft with an SRT rope hanging from above. Earlier, we had looked up this shaft from below. Resting on stacked 'deads' (waste rock) adjacent to the shaft window, Darren spotted the remains of a child's leather boot, in remarkable condition considering it had possibly been there for over 100 years. The obvious question is why the boot was left underground at all ! Surely the child didn't go home with only one boot on.

Just before re-entering the sandy, hands and knees crawl, we spotted a descending passage on the left, which ended at a small vertical drop through a hole. Below we entered a much larger worked out space, with a number of passages leading off. Darren and Paul explored a route over the top of a wall of 'deads' supported by horizontal timbers, while I found a descending passage which spiralled down to a lower chamber with a still pool of crystal clear water. Passing under an arch way, I checked out two horizontal workings which both ended in blank walls, then climbed up into a superb passage, almost circular in cross-section which headed off in two opposing directions. One direction was blind, but the other reached the lip of a short shaft into a large passage or chamber below. An original ladder, with timber sides and metal rungs, was still in place, leaning against the wall of the shaft. Although tempted to descend, I was alone and turned back to rejoin the others. Darren and Paul were just on their way down, so we returned to the laddered shaft together.

Despite its obvious age, the ladder looked perfectly sound, and Darren carefully lowered himself over the edge onto the upper rungs, while I attempted to stop the ladder moving. Without warning, the ladder snapped in two somewhere below Darren, and he fell about three metres to the bottom !! Fortunately, Darren managed to land in a kind of do-it-yourself parachute roll, and was unhurt, but we were all startled. Darren was clearly upset at the damage done to the ladder, but this was completely accidental. Certainly there was an important lesson here for us all.

I retrieved my emergency rope from the bag I had left earlier, by the start of the sandy crawl, and with Paul acting as human-belay, I climbed down to join Darren and we set off to explore. In addition to the 'stopes' excavated to exploit the vertical and steeply sloping veins, large areas of 'flats' had been worked by the miners, in which the ore was found in horizontal beds. It was immediately clear that Darren and I had entered one of these 'flats', as low crawls and spaces seemed to go off in all directions. A short distance away to the right, Darren found the base of Machine Shaft, with a plastic notice informing us that this shaft dropped from surface, with a series of ladders and platforms still in place in 1966. Water was pouring down from above, making it impossible to look up. Back in the flats, and a little further on, to the right, a steeply descending passage branched off to end at a choke of rocks and timber. The sound of a powerful torrent could be heard roaring, somewhere below this blockage. Darren later worked out that this point was somewhere beneath the surface river, but at a considerable depth. Apparently, before the mining activity lowered the water table, there was a substantial natural rising in the river here, and it is possible that, with the river in full flood, the old rising was acting as a flood-sink. This could be an infrequent occurrence, and consequently the sound of the underground torrent may not have been noted before.

Time was pressing, and Paul was still waiting in the upper passage, so we turned back. Using the rope as a knotted hand-line, made the climb up straightforward, and we set off back towards the entrance. The whole area is a labyrinth, but Darren seemed to have a photographic memory, and led us without difficulty back to 'Bertie's Chamber', following part of the yellow arrow route for the final section.

This was another superb trip, almost entirely in ground not covered during my previous visit, and apparently with much more still to see in the future.

Two lessons: Don't trust in-situ ladders, especially old ones in mines, and, always have a spare rope!

Colin 'Steve' Knox, 10th December 2006

Meets.

Jan 6. Yorks (Ingleboro' – depending on weather)

Jan 8. AGM. 8.30 Bleeding Wolf

Jan 17. DCRO First Aid TSG Chapel 7.30

Jan 28. Leck Fell

Feb 5. Meeting Bleeding Wolf

Feb 6. DCRO training at the store. "First on the scene"

Feb 7. DCRO First Aid TSG Chapel 7.30

Feb 25. Yorks. (Ingleboro')

March 4. DCRO Bagshaw Cavern. 10.00 am "Cas. Care"

March 10. Leck Fell.

As usual this is just the "backbone" of the programme. Len continues with his dig in "you know where", B&J continue digging on Stanley Moor when water levels permit and other trips that do not require booking will be fitted in. Darren Conde & co. are busy in the N Wales area- ask him and he might let you into a few secrets! Don't forget- if you want to do a particular trip let the meets sec know otherwise it won't happen!

There is bound to be some activity between Xmas and New Year so keep your eyes on your e mails and if that fails ring in.

Wet Suits FREE!!

If anyone can make use of a wet suit let Ralph know. He has a number of these that need putting to good use. Most of them are 7mm (quite thick) and were once upon a time popular for caving! There a few neoprene vests looking for a good home. If you feel the cold when caving ask and you'll get one!

PS. On our trip down Milwr Tunnel last Sunday Steve managed to find another entrance/exit into the system via the working quarry. About an hour with a crow bar would make this readily accessible