

Bryneglwys

(Abergynolwyn)

Trip 1 - 2/5/05
By Miles Moulding

Team: Miles, Haydn and Kathy



The aim of the day, well, the morning, was to go and have a look at Bryneglwys, a large underground slate quarry in a valley high up the mountainside above the village of Abergynolwyn. Kathy and Haydn picked me up from the village car park and we set off. Fortunately, Haydn owns a Landrover Defender with all the trimmings, so we were able to make use of the forestry track and drive right up to the mine, saving at least an hour's walk.

Haydn and Kathy had spent a number of days previously on the site doing recon, whereas this was my first visit. I was lucky enough to own the book by Alan Holmes which details the site extensively, and also unlucky enough to have left it at home, so we had no survey maps other than what I could remember, which was thus:

The main vein ran across the valley, in a SW to NE direction. There were various open workings in the valley floor, including a large haulage platform, and there were adits going up the valley on both SE and NE sides. These all led down to extensive chambering going well beneath the valley floor, the lower levels of which spanned the entire width of the valley. The highest level was the level 5, at either side of the valley. Next down was 10, then the 15, the 20, the 25, the 50, and finally, the dreaded Black Sync, no. 75. The 25 was the first to span the whole width of the valley, access to that or the 50 we hoped would open the mine up proper. The 75 was below the lowest adit, hence understandably flooded, and was not a complete level anyway. The 75 was regarded as a fearful place to work, hence it's name Black Sync.

The 50 level had an adit. Because of it's depth, the adit was extremely long, the portal for which emerged some distance away from the other workings down the mountainside. It was appropriately called the Long Tunnel and formed the primary access point to the main workings. I had read a very recent trip report in which the 50 level had been easily explored, but alas, Haydn informed me that the portal had since collapsed, a sad loss indeed. We drove to look at it, all that remained was a crater with a hole in the bottom, with water pouring out, clearly not passable anymore. For a while I was sure that Haydn was mistaken in thinking this was the 50 level, and instead we were looking at the 20. Wishful thinking perhaps, Haydn had done his homework and was right. He'd already found the 20 exactly where it was supposed to be, higher up. Given that we were indeed looking at the burbling remains of what was once the mighty 50 level, our options were dramatically reduced for exploring the lower workings of this mine. There was an engine shaft for this adit, but Haydn was pretty sure the Forestry Commission had capped it.



The next option would be to enter via the upper workings on either side of the valley, and make one's way down through the chambers to the 25 or 50. I remembered from my book, the principle side of the valley was the SW side, but Haydn said he'd explored that side thoroughly and not found any adits at all. My book gave their heights above sea level, and I did have my altimeter which would have helped to find where they were supposed to be amidst the dense conifer plantation, but without the book, therefore the altitudes, it would have been futile. He'd not yet looked at the other side of the valley, so we decided to head off to the NE end of the workings to see what we could see.



Before doing so, we made a stop off in the valley floor, to look at the big winding platform and the awesome drop over the edge into the mostly-collapsed central workings. We noted that lots of abseiling and prusaking in and out of these gigantic holes would possibly reveal other access points to the lower levels, but that's for another (and very sweaty) day.

The NE end had some massive tips and a big incline with drum house in fine condition. We were sure to find some way in up there, and split up to search. Kathy looked around at the bottom while Haydn found a shaft part way up. I left him to look at that and went higher, above the drum house, in search for anything else. I found a very overgrown cutting, and decided to follow it. After some clambering over brambles, sure enough a dark opening appeared at the end of the cutting.



As I got closer, it was apparent that it wasn't an adit, but a window into the top of some big underground chamber, a proper go'er - and venting too.



I shouted to Haydn and Kathy who came up to have a look, and we decided that further investigation was required. The question was raised about the viability of scrambling down, because at least as far as the light illuminated, it might be achievable, though steep and slimy. This was quickly denounced as a silly idea, as the depth of the chamber could not be determined, nor the angle or state of the ground beyond the point where the light reached. Kathy was nominated to go back to get the rope gear. Some time had passed before Haydn and I decided to go and search for her (mental note, must get walkie-talkies), as she had



mysteriously disappeared. We found Kathy tangled up in a fence that she had been trying to cross, where she had been for some time. After some general taunting, we made our way back to the opening, as it

began to rain. I hadn't got any rope kit with me, but fortunately Haydn and



Kathy had a spare harness. We kitted up in the rain, and I put a double figure-8 around a handy tree. I then proceeded to do a very bad rope-toss into the chamber, oh well, Haydn was going first anyway! I was handed a spare stitch plate for descending. I'd descended on a stitch plate before, but due to my lifestyle of too much chip-eating/computers and not enough exercise, my strength-to-weight ratio means I fly down a single rope rather over-enthusiastically using a stitch-plate. Ahh well, it would do me good and teach me to lay off the chips. Haydn hooks up first, and descended the rope into the chamber.



He quickly lowered himself into the chamber, leaving Kathy and I in the rain, peering into the darkness wondering if he'll ever be seen again. Suddenly, some distant shouts are heard echoing up from the blackness, something about a violent swing to negotiate. The rope shortly went slack and it was my turn, so I hooked up to the rope and began the decent. I was glad we didn't scramble it, the ground almost immediately became vertical and smooth and I didn't have any idea how much open air was beneath me to the chamber floor. Not that much as it turned out, maybe 50 feet

or so. Indeed there was a bit of a violent swing, but I had the benefit of Haydn shouting up the easiest route from the bottom, and I shortly joined him there.

Kathy followed, and I got a picture (right) of her near the bottom using my big new flash-gun I'd gotten cheap on eBay, which lit the scene up nicely.



Below Kathy's location in the picture, but just out of frame, was an opening into a tunnel, partly flooded. Before we investigated that though, we had a look around the chamber we had lowered ourselves into. Where we stood was actually an obvious level, on a sort of small platform, with the chamber descending still further below us choked with tip and rubble. Haydn and I scramble down this to get as low as possible in the chamber. It would make sense that at the bottom there would be another portal opening onto a lower level in the mine, however, with all the tip in there, it must have been buried, for we couldn't find it. The fact that the chamber was dry proved its existence, as otherwise it would fill with water up to the higher tunnel. We made our way back up to this, the only exit from the chamber other than the window in the roof (actually there was another smaller window to the one we dropped into, not far from it).



Entering the tunnel, it was shin deep in water and clearly a level connecting many other chambers like the one we were just in. We followed it deeper into the hillside to see where it went, which was past three or four other chambers and then stopped. Some of these chambers were collapsed (or filled with tip), but at least one could be easily entered.

Kathy and Haydn clearly expected to find Shelob in this tunnel



This chamber had obviously collapsed given the big size of the boulders, and water pours over them into the level.



This chamber is open and we take a look. We find it contains a man-way leading down that deserves exploration – but not today, we're out of rope.



The open chamber had a man-way in the floor, which might well be the ticket to the lower levels from this section of the mine. We didn't fancy lowering ourselves down here today, it looked like a squeeze and we had no rope to back ourselves up (our only rope was still fixed in the other chamber). I wouldn't be surprised if it terminates in the roof of some gigantic chamber, possibly flooded, possibly not – who knows. Actually, given it's position, it's most likely to come out conveniently into the lower access level, but it needs to be done roped with the ability to switch from descending the rope to ascending should it lead to someplace nasty or flooded workings.



Following the level, the slate vein is clearly visible on the left.

We headed back into the level, and had to decide what to do. If we followed it the other way, it would most likely lead back out to daylight saving a sweaty ascent back up the waiting rope. The downside was, the water seemed to get deeper and deeper that way, and there was no real telling how deep it would get without wading down it.

We opted to wade down the tunnel. I was glad I was wearing my trainers, rather than the nice warm chest-waders which I had at home. Off we waded down the tunnel.



FLASH - Oops, sorry Kathy, forgot the flash was still set to full power. I bet you're seeing spots now!



Aha! With the water up to our waists, daylight is seen up ahead, and it starts getting shallower.

The water got deeper and deeper until it was up to our waists, and daylight was seen ahead, there was a way out after all. Suddenly the water became more shallow as we neared the portal, and we were soon out to day.



Somehow we'd missed this adit on the way up, but there you go, they can be well hidden.

We decided that our short little through trip was enough for today, it was lunch time and we fancied heading over to another quarry for the afternoon.

Conclusion

After consulting the book later, we decided that we were most likely on the no.10 level. The survey showed what might have been the man-way, leading to the 15, which in turn connected with a chamber that probably leads down to the 25 level. The 25 level runs right under the valley and, like the (now assumed flooded) 50 level, connects all the workings. I'm still confident that access to the 25 level can be made from the other side of the valley, though access is obviously very elusive given all the time Haydn has spent there already. One can't rule out the real possibility that the Forestry Commission has destroyed the adits and planted trees over them. Maybe if we can obtain precise GPS co-ordinates for them, we can investigate further.

As mentioned it would also be worth, in the future, abseiling the central workings in the valley floor to see if any opportunities exist there.