

CWMORTHIN

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Team: Miles, Heather, Haydn, Simon, Rupert, Dave, Sabine and John



Cwmorthin needs little introduction. It's possibly (and arguably!) the best easily-explorable mine in Wales, if not the United Kingdom, and together with its neighbour Oakley (which it connects to underground in numerous places) they are rumoured to form the largest underground slate mining complex in the world. Indeed there are over 50 miles of tramway in there, and that's just to connect the chambers. Only a small percentage of the original workings can be explored today, but that still leaves an awful lot to see. Haydn (from Simply Exploring) has clocked up over 160 hours exploring Cwmorthin and still hasn't seen it all.

Our Trip Overview

Many of our eight-strong team hadn't met each other before and only two of us had been in Cwmorthin previously (Haydn and Myself). This trip was also Heather's first ever mine exploration.

This was my fifth trip to Cwmorthin, making up 23 hours total. Many of the pictures in this report were actually taken on my previous trips (when I spent more time on photography), and a few were taken by other members of the team.

We all gathered in the car-park and kitted up. There were lots of introductions and hand-shakes as we got to



know each other, and we set off up the steep track towards the lake. Originally on this day I'd planned to go alone to Rhiw-Bach, which turned into Myself, Simon and Rupert going to look at Cwmorthin, which then turned into a party of 7 as more and more people fancied coming along. It's certainly much more fun exploring mines in a group, and it makes a welcome change from doing it on my own which is never my preference.

I was intending to lead everyone on a circular route through the workings over a 5-6 hour trip but I was unsure of

navigating the final section. Thankfully, Haydn was available on this day and tagged along to lead us up through the last bit, which undoubtedly saved us much time in the end. His plan was to attempt a number of photography experiments with some new kit he'd acquired. I myself had just picked up a massive Metz45 flashgun but I was unable to get it to work in the mine.



After arriving at the Lake-Level adit portal, we all got into our underground gear. The Lake-Level adit was always the primary access point to the mine, and is now the only access point as all the other adits have collapsed. The Lake-Level adit itself isn't looking too good these days as the first 40 feet or so run under a massive tip, and the supports holding this up are showing serious signs of strain. It'll be a sad day when it goes but there is rumour of another way in through the old flue which would maintain access (although it would be much more difficult).

As soon as we stepped inside, Haydn vanished into the depths of the mine to conduct his experiments whilst the rest of us made our way past the top of a descending stairway and an early chamber to the top of the Back Vein Incline (BVI herein). We prepared to make our decent from our present level (level 1) down to level E, stopping off at various points of interest on the way. Level 1 is named as it is from the first period of underground working which went up from the lake level, through floors 2 to 7 and finally reaching floor 8 high in the mountainside. During the latter period the mine workings were taken down from lake level, and are named A, B, C, D, E, F and G, with around 80 vertical feet between each level. The incline we were about to descend terminates on level E. Another incline goes down from lake level to level E through the Old Vein workings, and is known as the Old Vein Incline (OVI). We were to see more of that later.



We started the descent. The incline was fairly steep but not overly difficult to walk down, although the roof was a little low. Not far down we encountered the remains of a little waste-truck tangled up in the drum cable. We also passed by a sealed dam on the left (Level A), leading into a chamber flooded to provide stability and a water source.

We shortly reached level B which was an interesting area. Right at the junction on the incline were the remains of two wagons, one of which was complete but jammed against the roof in a most unusual position. The other wagon, or the top part of it, lay nearby and was probably the other half of the wagon we found higher up.

My theory is some hooligans wheeled them onto the incline from lake level to watch them disappear down the track at great speed. They would have lost control and left the rails, one breaking into two pieces and the other jamming where it remains to this day.





We left the incline at this point and walked onto level B. Here was yet another wagon (a slab wagon this time) and also another dam. From this dam lead a very rusty pipe, with water spurting out the gaps in the rust. This pipe will have fed the lower levels with high-pressure water, but the water now escapes and cascades down the incline as a stream.



We followed level B to the right and after a short while it opened onto the top of a very large and deep chamber, but fortunately with a walkway left in situ so we could proceed further. This predictably led to another chamber, but the floor had been worked away in this one and replaced with a timber bridge.



The bridge had only its two supporting joists still in situ but can be crossed with care and nerve, although Haydn tells me it leads to no avail. We stopped to take some pictures and the question was raised of how beams of such length were ever got into their position through the twisty tunnels. Personally I'd no idea.

We made our way back to the junction and took the passage leading left along level B. the tunnel looped around and passed over the incline in the top hard. It led into a fair sized chamber and in here we found Haydn just finishing a photo.

The chamber hadn't been worked into from below so there was a good deal of floor space to walk around on. On the working face was an impressive stairway leading up to lake level. This stairway was the same as the one we passed before descending the BVI, and consisted of wooden steps fixed on iron pegs driven into the slate. The lower portion was slate-slab.

The purpose of the stairway was to allow the rock-men to descend to their place of work without needing to walk down the incline.

Walking on the incline was dangerous and forbidden because of the wagons constantly being lowered down and hauled up. There was little room to get out of the way when one passed and a number of accidents had occurred involving collisions.



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The man-way eventually reached level C, opening onto a platform at the top of a large chamber. Looking down, level E could be seen far below, level D having been entirely worked away.

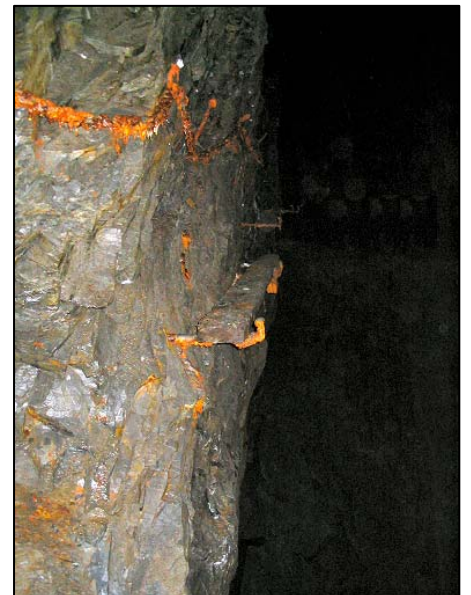


On level E (which had a foot of water covering much of it) could be seen a number of wagons and also the head of the E-G incline. This incline was completely submerged beneath the water along with all of Cwmorthin's level F and G workings. Facing the head of this incline was the winder that hauled wagons up it, resembling a crane more than a traditional drum-house. We were to look more closely at this later.

On our right, a timber bridge (perhaps the most complete in Cwmorthin) led back towards the BVI. It was across this that Haydn crossed and descended further into the mine to take more pictures, while we took a passageway leading left into another large chamber. This chamber was worked above and below us, and the floor on which we stood was built up from stacked waste. This chamber obviously got used for camping, as there were several piles of ash and a pretty disgusting makeshift toilet.



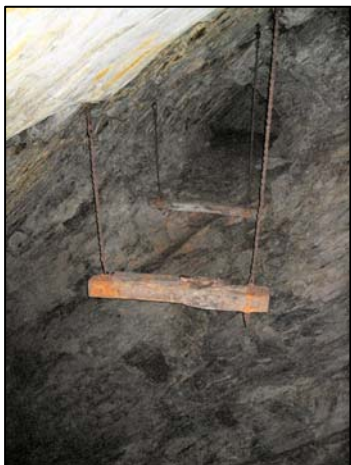
in this chamber could be seen a good surviving example of a cat-walk. This essentially was a walkway for the rockmen comprising solely of small planks of wood resting on iron pegs, and a rope at waist-height to hold on to. The exposure was terrifying and the drop very a sobering 60-70 feet to the chamber floor. Traversing this whilst carrying tools and a candle for light must have been a very unpleasant experience.



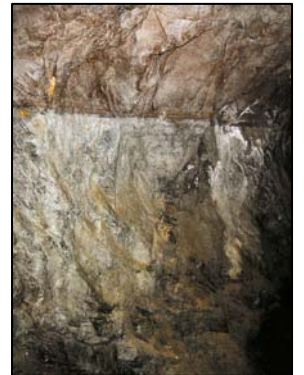
After a quick look around we headed back to the BVI, avoiding the rotting bridge by climbing back up the man-way to level B and heading to the junction. We then proceeded down the BVI to level C.



The junction of level C had a window into the chamber on the right, with a sturdy chain across it to provide some protection. The bridge that used to span it had almost all gone with only the iron roof supports remaining. It may have been deliberately broken up during the working of the mine when access was no longer required.



There wasn't much else to see on this level so we dropped down the BVI further to reach the level D junction. Level D didn't have much interesting either, the bridge leading to the right having also collapsed or been broken up. One feature that is easy to miss is a contour change in rock colour on the walls (see right). This was the level of the water when the mine was flooded, before Oakley took over and drained the workings via a special drainage tunnel cut in the early 1930's. This tunnel (on level E) is still the drainage level for Cwmorthin to this day, although it is slightly higher than the floor of level E by a couple of feet. This means level E is a couple of feet deep in water, and it was this we were about to negotiate. The BVI from D to E is the steepest section and awkward to negotiate.



Out of the seven of us, only two of us had waders and three didn't fancy getting wet, so the plan was to set up a relay system. Myself (in waders) would walk with someone else to the point where the water ended and take the waders back to the next person. This process took about 45 minutes to complete but it did stop us getting wet to our waists.



Our route on level E was to make our way East to the dewatering tunnel installed by Oakley, but before doing so we headed a short distance to the West to go look at the E-G incline winder mentioned earlier. In here we again came across Haydn taking a picture.



In here also were a number of wagons, some of which were loaded with crane parts. A tunnel continued West to the numerous chambers in that direction but we turned around here to head East to “Lefel Ffrench”, the dewatering tunnel into Oakley named after the Frenchman who was contracted to drive it. It was a long walk along the bottom of level E to reach it, following a water pipe and airlines the whole way. The tunnel passed along the bottom of many chambers (11 to be precise) before a little ramp led up into the dewatering tunnel, signifying the end of Cwmorthin and the start of Oakley. Because of a difference in the level naming between the two mines, what was level E in Cwmorthin was known as level D in Oakley. Hence, there is a one letter offset between the mines, so we were now standing on level D even though we’d not gained any height from Cwmorthin level E.



The dewatering tunnel itself was fairly long but eventually it lead into proper Oakley workings. A little further and we reached the head of the Oakley D-I Incline (Known as the Oakley Ch.34 Incline), enabling up to drop down deeper underground. Haydn and Heather stayed at the incline head while the rest of us began the



descent, and I myself had never been this way. The going was slippery but we eventually reached Oakley level G. The incline continued to level I but Oakley’s water level at this point was just below G. Hence the incline dipped into deep water.

Level G was a fairly substantial level but much of it was off the map I was carrying. Because of this, our visit down here was going to be short lived through not wanting to get lost. There were two Cabans we’d come to see which were not far off the incline, and we made our way to the first one.

The first Caban was fairly large inside and built from sawn-ends. Written across the door was its name, “Queen Mary Café”. There was a shelf next to the door, placed on which were a couple of old shovels. Inside, the roof was missing along with all the newspaper cuttings that were rumoured to once adorn the walls.

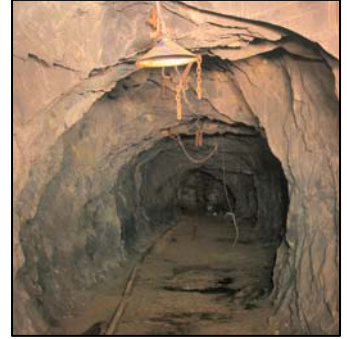




After leaving this Caban, we followed a tunnel around through a few chambers until a second smaller Caban was reached (no picture was taken!). This was built into a small cavity and again had well-built little walls, but an interesting feature was that this Caban had a well-laid slate tiled floor!

After a look at this and some extremely deeply flooded chambers nearby, we made our way back to the Oakley Ch.34 incline and began the steep ascent up to the incline head, where Heather and Haydn were waiting for us. From

here we took a connecting level which brought us into one of Oakley's major levels, featuring a drainage channel in the floor (a Grip?) and also electric lighting. A short way along this led us to a chamber containing two large boilers, installed for use as water tanks. There was also a stove, and some large concrete compressor bases, which made handy picnic benches for our lunch break.



From here, we made our way up the chamber past the boilers (one of which is inscribed in yellow chalk, "Keep out, pp Inspector of Mines") to an opening at the very top in the back wall. This opening was the start of a steep man-way leading up to a higher level, and one at a time we made the climb up. Thankfully someone had installed a static rope to hold on to which made the scramble much easier. At the very top was a handy aluminium ladder (right).



Once we'd all gathered at the top we rounded the corner to reach an interesting section of tunnel. It was a few feet taller than usual and featured tram-rails embedded into the side about three feet from the floor. These used to hold up floorboards so water could be stored underneath like a tank. The water was gone now and we proceeded down the tunnel, ducking under the rails as we went. We were now leaving Oakley and entering the Cwmorthin Old Vein workings (not the

Back Vein workings we were in previously!) onto level C. Nearby where we entered the Old Vein workings was a large chamber which featured a slab stairway leading up out of sight, terminating at level A. We made our way gradually up this stairway led by Haydn, at the top of which we headed west in the direction of the Old Vein Incline (OVI).



Before reaching the OVI we had to pass through a section of tunnel driven through shale, which had largely collapsed. This section could only be crossed by crawling which we did one at a time, passing rucksacks though first to Haydn waiting at the other



side. We soon all go though to find ourselves standing on the much degraded OVI, level A junction. The OVI is in a bad state but given that we were only one level below lake level, we opted to ascend the incline directly rather than take an alternate route (of which there were several).



It was hard going scrambling up such rubble but we soon reached the incline head, back on lake level.

From here, we followed a number of passages around lake level to bring us out back at the top of the BVI, having done a complete loop. A couple of minutes walk brought us back to the adit portal and into daylight.

We all got changed out of our underground gear and remarked on what an excellent trip it had been through the mountainside!

Conclusion

I was surprised that such a long trip only took just less than five hours underground to complete. I'd expected it to take eight.

The loop trip we'd just done through Cwmorthin and Oakley was superb and remains one of the great UK mine trips to do. Nothing technical is required at any point although there are plenty of technical routes for those looking for a bit more challenge.

The place is a maze and not to be explored without all the right maps and/or someone who really knows where they are going. I can't recommend it highly enough to other explorers who've not tried it, and although I've been five times now I can't wait to return to look at the masses of workings I've still not seen. It's a shame the upper workings are such a mess and that the vast majority of Oakley workings are either cut off because of roof-falls or submerged below the water table. None the less there is still masses to see down there and much exploring fun to be had.

