

Dinorwig

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About Dinorwig

Dinorwig was one of the biggest producers of Slate in Great Britain, second in size only to Penrhyn (to my knowledge). It was worked over a 182 year period from 1787 to 1969. At its peak it was producing over 100,000 tonnes of finished slates annually and employed over 3,000 men. Anyone driving up the pass from Llanberis will either be appalled or amazed at the entire mountain of workings that extends up out of view.

The corpse was barely cold after its closure before the site was bought by an electricity company and turned into a pumped-storage power station, commonly known as "Electric Mountain". It's the largest in Europe, and is special in that the whole power station is built entirely underground, housed in gigantic chambers. They did want to build it as a massive external ugly building (like power stations generally look) but the planning regulators decided that Industry had taken enough of a toll on the landscape and rightly forced them to conceal it deep in the mountain. The same cannot be said for the hideous disused nuclear power station a way to the south that was built above ground. "Electric Mountain" operates an excellent tour from their show-centre in Llanberis and is well worth the small fee to be shown around the complex.

Dinorwig, vast though it is, is not an easy one to look around because the far-eastern power company that owns it clearly doesn't like the idea of anyone stepping foot on this historical site. There is now a path that runs through the middle of it, from near the village of Dinorwig and ending up on the Llanberis Pass at the head of Llyn Peris. One gets the feeling the path has been opened through local pressure, as it gives a feeling of real reluctance to be there as you walk down it. The path for its entire length on both sides is caged in by a serious barbed fence, and threatening signs are nailed everywhere making sure you're aware who owns it and that trespassing will not be tolerated. You can look at the workings from the path, but fences must be crossed for a closer look around. This of course risks getting mobbed by the station heavy squad, who I can quite envision periodically driving up and down the path in a Ranger Rover Vogue with a search-light, firing upon any Gortex and Fleece wearing stragglers they find attempting to stray.

Today's Mission

Dinorwig is generally considered to be of no interest to mine explorers (apart from the interesting surface relics of course), because it was worked entirely as opencast terraces. There are rumoured to be however, a small network of tunnels connecting all the big pits. The aim of the day was to investigate these tunnels to find out if they offered any adventure at all and also to see if any underground workings do really exist.

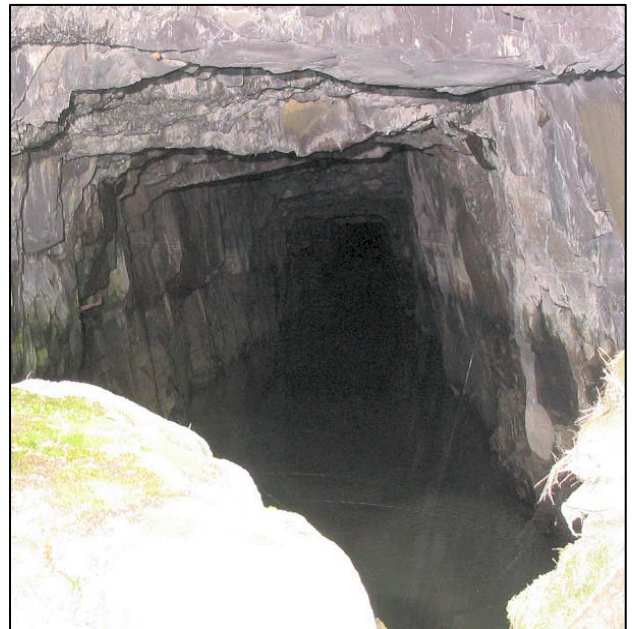
So, I started by driving up to the top end of the path and parking in a little lay-by where the walk starts. It's the kind of parking place that makes you wonder if your conveyance will resemble an unwheeled pile of broken glass, cables, twisted metal and "Police Aware" stickers when you return to it.

Starting down the path, I came at first to the big 1925 Mill. I don't know if that's its name, but it says 1925 on it, so that name will do for the time being.



Like everything it's sealed off with a fence (but only a low one here) and some threatening signs but these have been partly kicked down giving easy access. There is little to see inside except a number of rotary-dressing machine guards, and an odd water tank in the corner.

A little further along the track, passing a major incline system, I came to a gate on the left leading into a medium sized pit with a number of obvious adits in the sides. The gate of course was covered in barbed wire and threatening signs but there were a number of people already in here (practicing their rock-climbing skills) so I hopped over too. On the left hand side was a big red grate so I walked up to that first.



The grate was bolted up proper. There were just enough gaps around the sides to hold in my camera and flashgun to take a picture. As can be seen, it's a fairly major tunnel with no daylight in sight. Some earlier attempt to block it has dammed the water and hence it's partially flooded. Clearly from the walls it gets deeper than the present level. I assume this tunnel to connect through to a very large pit that is behind it some way off. They obviously don't want anyone in here (pity, looks like a decent level), so I check out the other openings in the pit.



On the other side of the pit are two more openings, as shown above. There was also another one that involved a bit of a climb up to. I did scramble up to it though the last short section was very exposed, and decided not to push it without rope protection (not so much to get into, but to get out from). So I stuck with these two easier ones, starting with the larger, lower one which I made my way over to.

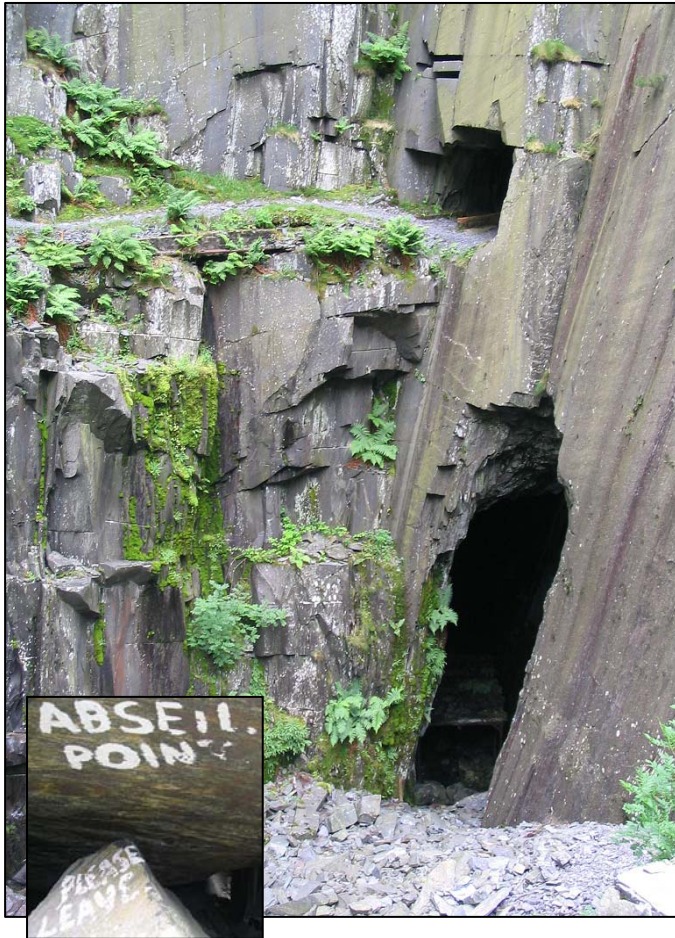


The tunnel was short with a water channel following it part of the way. At the end, it opened into the side of a big pit, with the path running around the edge on a level to a tunnel continuing the other side. It reminded me of one of those road-runner cartoons with a road hugging a cliff and a serious drop to the side.



Actually the drop was quite serious and with the path not being wide or level it demanded being treated with respect. It wasn't actually unsafe provided one was careful, but it's not a path to attempt drunk in high winds whilst wrestling an umbrella.

On the right hand side of the picture my composition annoyingly cuts off much of the path round, but you get the idea. I made my way to the continuing tunnel, but upon reaching it I looked back to where I'd come from and saw something that surprised me.



Looking below the tunnel that I had emerged from (the upper one), I saw a much larger opening which to me looked like a window into some sort of small chamber.

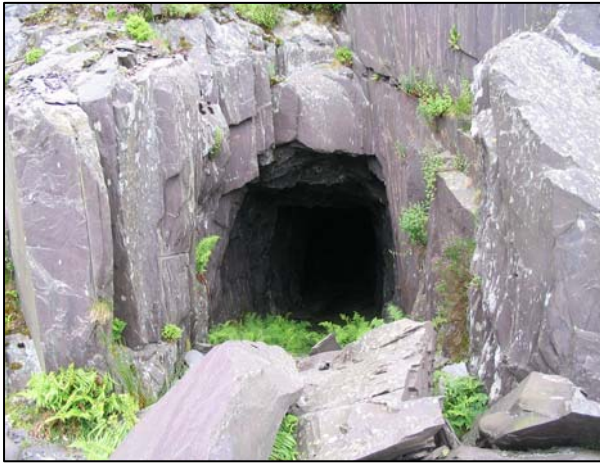
It wasn't very wide but looked like it might be wider inside. It was far too high to be a regular level, and some timber structure could be seen in the darkness.

I presumed it must connect through into other workings, as it was dry inside despite much water flowing into it. It certainly looked like underground workings to me, as I couldn't imagine what it would be for otherwise. There was no way down into it without SRT kit (which I didn't have) or broken bones so I could only look. There was a sign saying "Abseil Point, Please Leave", but obviously someone hasn't left it as it was gone. None the less with an abseil point marked, it must go somewhere interesting so it's one to come back to another day.

I followed the continuing tunnel, which was a bit longer than the previous and contained lots of graffiti (some allegedly from 1864!) and a big iron wheel clearly intended to have a heavy chain wrapped around it. What for I've no idea. At the end of the tunnel, I was able to walk out into the bottom of the big pit. There was no obvious other way out of this,

except another tunnel in the side of the pit wall accessed by climbing a 60 foot vertical chain. I wasn't feeling tired enough of life today to attempt to climb it, so I had a quick sniff around the pit floor before making my way back to the original pit. The only thing I found of interest was a mammoth steel cable of such girth I wondered what it could have been for. An arial Blondin system maybe?





Right back to the original pit, I made my way to the upper tunnel to see what was happening there. I had to go all the way around back onto the path and cross the fence higher up to gain an old tramway to reach it. I was therefore much annoyed to discover that it was blocked about 50 meters in by roof-fall. The gaps were big enough to climb into the wreckage a little and I was surprised to discover I could shine my torch quite high until fallen blocks obscured the view. Maybe this was a shaft or some form of chamber that collapsed, I don't think it was just the tunnel. It possibly connected on the other side with the opening with the chain I saw earlier. I made my way back out to the pit and wandered around the perimeter.

While passing round the far side, I noticed a suspicious pile of rocks. What makes a rock look suspicious I don't know but I was sure they were up to no good and went for a closer look. It was then I noticed written on the rock face above them was the word "Cave" and an arrow pointing to the floor. "Cave" is not quite the right word but I got the idea. Indeed, between the rocks was a very tight narrow hole dropping vertically down into blackness.



I lowered myself slowly into the hole, barely fitting. I had to have my bag on a string to pull down after me as there no way I'd have fitted wearing it. I slid for maybe six or seven or feet before I came to a stop, and



turning around with my torch I was impressed to discover that I was standing in a major level. It was obvious at this point that the portal had been blasted with dynamite to block it, but somebody since had dug out a way though just wide enough to provide access. Immediately inside was a cage door, providing maybe an early form of barrier before the dynamite idea. It had been booted off its hinges, so I wandered in.

In here I experienced an unusual sensation. The floor was buzzing, and I could hear a faint hum. I put my ear to the wall, and sure enough, it was making a buzzing noise, quiet prominent. I'd never had that in a mine tunnel before, which are normally eerily silent. Thinking back to my more musical days, I put the frequency of the sound at around 500 cycles per second. I then realised the turbine speed of the power station deep in the rock below is 500 cycles per second (I learnt that on the tour the previous day) and the penny dropped. When they call it "Electric Mountain", they are not joking, the entire mountain buzzes if you put your ear to it. I proceeded into the vibrating tunnel.



The floor was littered with sleepers and daylight was seen not far ahead. A fork to the right didn't go far, maybe 50-60 feet, ending with a little shrine on the floor. I headed back to the main junction and walked towards the light at the end of the tunnel (which is so hard to do in everyday life, maybe because there are not enough tunnels.)

It ended, not surprisingly, in another big pit. The pit had no real interesting aspects to it, other than (like the other pits) the sheer size and height of the surrounding walls. There was no way in or out other than the

passage I entered through, but I still spent about half an hour exploring the pit to check. Because the pit must surely fill with water, and the passage I entered was totally dry, I figured there must be another level in there for drainage right at the bottom. If there was (and I was sure there was) it was now buried under rubble (obviously dynamited with much more gusto or collapsed over) though it must still be draining. I headed back towards the exit where a big iron pipe had been arranged into a cross and stuck vertically into the ground, standing about 40 feet high. I stopped to take a 'creative' picture on my camera before making my way back through the tunnel, into the pit and back on to the main path again.



When I finally got there, I weighed up my options. I'd only explored a tiny portion of the site and it was getting late, so decided to just go a little further along the path to see what else was happening then call it a day.

Part way along, I passed what looked like a fairly new structure resembling a military checkpoint and I assumed (though I may be wrong!) this to be the top of the power-stations surge pool.



If one could get over all the razor-wire and look down into this structure (it has no roof), one would see a huge round pipe dropping hundreds of feet into blackness with the sound of roaring water below.

I suppose the security is to dissuade people from jumping down it for a laugh. If one was to do something that stupid, you'd be instantly crushed to oblivion by the high pressure deep water that you'd be sucked into at speed, then drown, shortly before being liquidised by a 24 tonne turbine blade spinning at 500rpm before finally being deposited as fish food on the bottom of Llyn Peris.

Further along, a gigantic pit appears on the left that from the path you can't see into. In the wall over the fence was another tunnel and I climbed over to have a look.

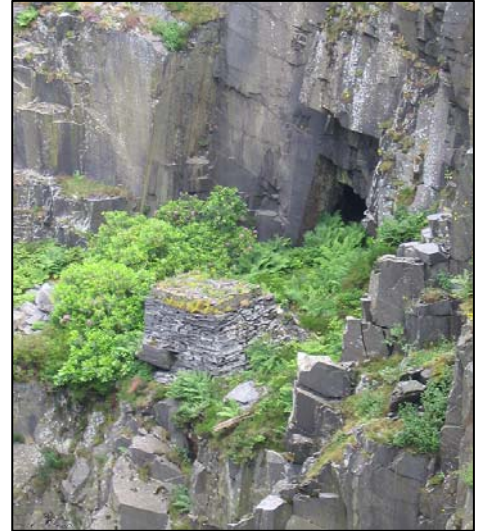


The level continued for a way before splitting off left and right as a Y junction. Unfortunately both directions ended in rockfall and were blocked.



Heading back out, I stopped to peer into the pit. It was without doubt the most alarming sheer drop I've ever seen – hundreds of vertical feet to broken rubble at the bottom. Inside could be seen a few building remains and a few more tunnels though access to them now would be very difficult.

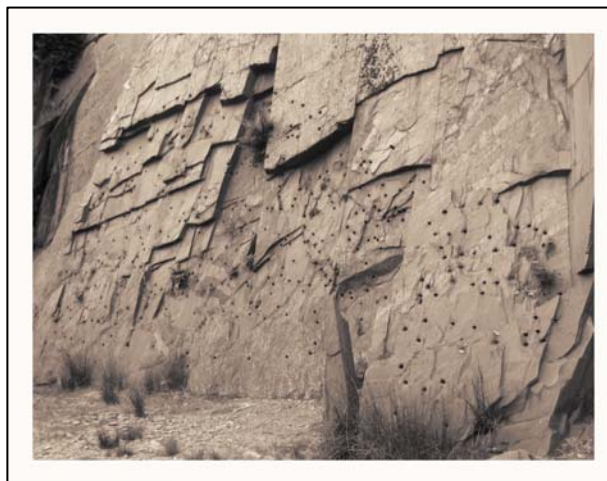
With time pressing on, I headed back along the path towards the car and drove off home satisfied with my trip.



Conclusion

Well, for an opencast quarry I still managed to spend a reasonable amount of time underground. By the end of the day I'd still only seen a small area of the whole site and no doubt further exploration would reveal many more tunnels and I've no doubt some will prove very long. For instance, the tunnel with the red grate looked very long and probably has branches. It can't be accessed from that end but where it terminates in the pits will most probably be open. That said, it might require a very long abseil to actually get into the pit, so future examination would be good to ascertain this. The "Chamber" I saw I'd very much like to look at properly by coming back with a rope. It looks to me like underground working and I'd be keen to see if it leads to further chambers.

Dinorwig is a fantastic site and certainly worth a few hours to wander around. The scale of the humming workings is truly awe-inspiring, plus I understand some of the mills still have a lot of machinery in them though I didn't come across any on this trip. If you're into Welsh slate history, Dinorwig is a great walk about.



Either blast-hole training was carried out here for the old rockmen, or a hapless walker strayed off the path only to be machine gunned at long range by the power station heavy squad.

♦Foot Note 14/8/05: I am told on good authority from a Mr. Davison who visited the power station numerous times during its construction, that the building in this trip report is not actually the surge pond as I thought it was. Apparently, the surge pond is much higher up, and considerably larger than this building (150m across!). Mr. Davison suggests the building in the photo to perhaps be a ventilation shaft or similar.