

February 8th 1987

Coniston Top Level Extension

COMRU MEET Exploration and filming of newly entered part of Top Level

Mike Mitchell, Dennis Webb, Alen McFadzean, Ian Matheson, Phil Merrin, Alistair Lings, Ann Danson, Chris Jones, Martin Maher, Alan ?, Chris Moore, Gordon Gilchrist, Dave Bridge, Angela Wilson, Roy Garner, Kathleen Botting.

Some timber provided by Mike Mitchell and a lot of gear was driven up to Levers Water in two Landrovers. The party entered the mine via the Funnel and Arête Chamber and crossed to Dead Dog Passage by an airy traverse pioneered by Mike Mitchell, Gordon Gilchrist and Angela Wilson the previous Sunday. Timber and ropes were ferried across by Tyrolean traverse line. The new battery powered rock drill was used to place the bolts to secure this system, taking about 30 seconds to drill each hole! Amongst the first across were Alen McFadzean and Dennis Webb, who went straight to the Top Level dig in order to set more timber to stabilise the bottom of the hole, which is about sixteen feet deep! In passing a heavy stemple down here Alen lost his grip and launched it down the hole to hit Dennis on the head. It may have reduced his stature by another inch or so, but apparently did no harm!

There was some anxiety on the part of those who had already explored the full length of Top Level that others might get ahead and find something new, so there was a delay whilst lunch was partaken. After lunch however the front runners only went a few yards beyond the first stope and then set about fixing rope in order to descend a shaft in a side level and so free exploration was allowed.

Top Level extends for about 540 yards beyond the main blockage and in the main corresponds to the plans. About thirty yards beyond the dig there is a shaley area and a passage to the north is backfilled. The main level turns to the west and passes through a collapsed chamber from where a squeeze down gains entry to 75 yards of sound passage. This intersects a large stope where a partially buried ore tub, identical to that in the Waterfall Shaft below Grey Crag Level, stands on its rails on a section of false floor. To the right is a funnel probably leading down to Middle Level, whilst to the left a climb down and up again enables the main level to be followed. At the top of the climb a niche contains a decayed wooden box like structure and a broken hammer head.

After 25 yards there is a level to the left at the entrance to which was a complete but dismantled portable jackroll windlass, the third jackroll to be found since exploration of this part of the mine was begun last Boxing Day. A few yards beyond is the shaft already mentioned, and a bit further still the level passes through an area which looks as though it has been torn asunder and rent by gigantic forces. The floor, of native rock, is shattered and has dropped about a foot, whilst a jagged hole in the side of the passage gives a view into a large stope. The level then continues for another 25 yards or so, turns 90degrees to the right and ends 10 yards further on at an intersection with a deep but narrow stope through which voice connection can be made with the jagged hole.

Back on the main drive and continuing for a few yards in a westerly direction the level widens to form a chamber containing a wall of deads. A clay pipe was found here and placed on a ledge for safety, but unfortunately it had disappeared by the end of the day. A wooden clog lies here and its heel iron exactly matches the prints in the muddy floor. A little further on is the remains of a large wooden box, which might have been a tub. To the right a high stope runs to the north, and is almost parallel to the passage used to reach it. This cross course runs at about 120° to the majority of veins in this part of the mine. At its entrance a curious iron hinge was leaning against the wall, and further in can be seen a heavy chain rising about 40 feet to false floors and possibly a level. A few feet down two funnels in the rubble floor seem to lead to a buried and collapsed level with deep water below.

An awkward climb over the deads at the entrance chamber gives into a spacious but blind level 30 yards long driven west and containing some tram lines. In here was a hammer or pick with a broken end and a decayed handle. Close by was an iron shot hole scraper with an eye forged on the other end and also a curious shallow wooden tray with shaped hand grips. There are at least three of these in this part of the mine. Could they have been for carrying clay used for stemming, or for black powder?

A few yards further along the main drive is a shorter level running parallel to that just described. It contained no artefacts, but at the end is a pink deposit which Alistair Lings thinks is a vein of cobalt.

The main drive continues for another 360 yards to a forehead. There is another blind level about 40 yards on the left, and several short but unproductive trials, but the main interest is in the drive itself, where several different types of tramline can be seen. There is a section of wooden rail with a flat iron strip on the wearing surface and further on some rather thin iron rails. In the final section the rails have been removed.

On the left of the level, at shoulder height, are a series of iron hangers, some of which support short lengths of cast iron pipe of about six inches diameter. Further on there is a long length of beautifully made wooden air trunking. It is about eight inches square and has close fitting tapered joints. Where the level changes direction the end of the sections are boxed and either a round or an oval takeoff has been cut. Much of this trunking is still in good condition. Also in this area is a pair of clogs. The wooden sole is rotten, but the leather is still supple! The level ends abruptly at a forehead after about 300 yards of drive through solid rock in which there is no sign of ore.

Most of the days activity took place in the vicinity of the Jackroll Level, various groups pursuing their interests, filmed on video by Roy Garner with the assistance of Kathleen Botting. Phil Merrin, Alen McF, Dennis Webb, and Chris Jones descended the shaft beside the jackroll. This goes about 60 feet to Middle Level, landing on the far side of our dig at the Four Way Junction. Evidence there indicates that the miners too had tried to clear a way through this collapse, probably using the Jackroll windlass to clear debris at the foot of the shaft, which appears to have been an ore shoot. A small group was able to assemble the windlass, which is held together by wedges. When complete the roll turned

smoothly on its wooden bearings, and it was filmed for posterity.

Meanwhile, several people visited Woodends Level and rise. Angela Wilson prussicked up the maypole which had previously been positioned alongside the three sections of wooden ladder above the level. Near the top of the maypole she brushed against the ladder, and the bottom two sections collapsed. She was not able to reach the level as the maypole was too short. Martin Maher tried also, climbing precariously above the maypole. He too failed, but was able to see a level which surprisingly appeared to run back over Dead Dog Passage. Exploring this area, which must have been productive to justify the workings put in below, is a fascinating project for the future.

The opportunity was taken by Ann Danson, Chris Jones, and Ian Matheson to make use of the bolting drill to place some anchors in the stope at the end of Jackroll Level for future use. Having done so, it seemed a pity not to go down. Ian Matheson fixed an abseil rope and set off. The stope is narrow, quite clean, and hades slightly to the southwest. At about 70 feet he reached a length of false floor piled with debris, almost certainly Middle Level. At either end the stope continued down a long way. To the right, the eastern end, the floor ended in perched boulders, and a steep gravel slope could just be seen below. At the western end of the floor the timber is very rotten, and there is a great deal of loose wood and rock. There are holes in the floor, and rocks dropped through rattled down much further than at the other end. There was insufficient time to make safe and to rebelay the rope, so he returned to Jackroll Level. Peter Fleming later suggested that this stope is in fact Avalanche Stope, which leads down from Levers Water Mine and was descended to a choked bottom some 30 feet above Grey Crag Level by C.A.T. in 1985.

The final drama of the day was provided by Mike Mitchell, who was examining the loose ground in the large stope below the ore tub when a run occurred and he was carried down several feet and partially buried. Chris Jones said later that all you could see was his eyes! He was extricated after a short while, and suffered a broken lamp and watch, a black eye, some bruises, and a lot of humour from his colleagues. The last people out reached the surface about 7.30 and adjourned to the Crown at Coniston.

Ian Matheson.