

**7<sup>th</sup> August 1988**  
**Honister Slate Mine**

ML: Alastair Cameron plus 8 members.

The "Lake Poets", those opium-soaked eccentrics of the 19th century, frowned on any form of industrialisation in the Lake Counties; Honister Slate Mine being near the top of their "hit-list". Bill Wordsworth, when he wasn't committing incestuous sin with his sister, penned many paragraphs about Honister and described the "terror in the eyes of the miners" as they hung in woven baskets held by chains driven into the face of the crag. John Ruskin that literary mega-bore and lover of little boys, is supposed to have toured the underground workings inside the crag. Towards the end of his life he is reputed to have had a recurring dream. It involved him standing in darkness on a "tottering and crumbling pile of turmoil and despair" with his pathetic body subjected to intense heat and pressure as the ceiling and walls pressed in on him.

That was all many years ago. Today, 150 years on, a different type of person is inspecting the now crumbling remains of the Honister Mine, this time all nice clean living guys to a man.

The latest C.A.T. trip to Honister was held on the hottest day of 1988, a fact that caused some discomfort as we struggled into our under-ground gear in the Honister Hause car park. It also must have caused much amusement to the scantily dressed fell-walkers setting out up the Drum House track with Great Gable in mind. What none of them could ever have known was that in the caverns deep inside Honister Crag the air temperature would be precisely 55 degrees F even on the hottest day of the year.

The previous Honister trip which was reported in newsletter No 19 had been the first official C.A.T. trip to the area. There were several objectives for the present trip including correcting and upgrading the 1971 Collinson mine-plan (reproduced in newsletter 19), carrying out more interpretation of the site, entering some of the many as yet unexplored areas and, not the least, keeping as cool as possible.

Having gained access to the Link Level (and got out of the sun), the internal "Old Incline" was the first objective. There is no doubt that the restoration of the incline, winding drum and the counterbalance system would be a very worthwhile project. Good potential for a future C.A.T. meet.

From the top of the incline the party climbed out onto the external incline which was in bright sunshine. At this point we were about three quarters of the way up the crag face. John Adams climbed the rest of the way up the incline to check the mine map while the meet leader, who doesn't like heat at the best of times, sat in the shade. We were in an amazing situation. Directly below us a thousand feet down tiny cars looking like toys moved up and down the Honister road. A number of families were picnicking by the roadside. My father always told me never to throw stones or roll boulders down the mountains. I never have, but there have been times when temptation has -----

It is not possible to descend to the bottom of the crag by the external incline because; at one point where it crosses Black Star Gully it has fallen away into the depths of the gully. However it is possible to go into the crag above the gully, climb down the Internal Incline for a short way and pass back to the outside below the gully. Having done this Mike Mitchell and I spent sometime looking back up the incline debating how it had crossed the gully. It was always assumed that this was by a steep timber bridge but there is some evidence that it may have been by a solid masonry structure and we went away feeling that this was the case. Peter Holmes, a C.A.T. member from Newcastle backs this up in a very interesting letter in journal No 20.

Before leaving the incline we were visited by a yellow Sea King helicopter which chomped its way up from Buttermere and hung there opposite us for a few seconds before soaring away only to reappear shortly afterwards. Had someone down below raised the alarm? Fortunately it didn't come back a third time. We would have looked immensely stupid if they'd tried to rescue us.

By this time the sun was in the zenith and it was time to go back into the cool of the crag and climb the New Incline. This was the point at which we got the first hint of the vandalism that had occurred since our last trip.

First of all the party explored the bottom level and made corrections to the mine-plan. Then we returned to the foot of the incline and found that the ladder and hand line had been removed. The ladder was found and repositioned. Then we noticed that metal drums had been rolled down the incline, probably all the way from the top. We started to climb the incline and noticed further signs of damage. Most of the hand line had been cut. At one point a section of ladder had been completely removed and mild gymnastics were needed to progress onwards. Finally we found that the silly buggers had lowered the slate trolley with the turntable turned in such a way that the trolley was jammed against the fourth horizon loading station. All very clever.

It was now getting towards the end of the trip. The party members who hadn't been to Honister before were shown the famous graffiti in the winding station and then we went out to day to climb down to the car park.

The afternoon was hot and humid and all the shops in Borrowdale had sold out of lemonade.

Each visit to Honister produces more un-answered questions. We will need to organise another trip soon to safeguard the New Incline from further vandalism and get the Old Incline trolley back on the rails. There is also a promising looking tunnel found by Mike Mitchell near the top of the crag which could give access to further unexplored areas.

There is no doubt that some major restoration is needed if, what must be the finest monument to Victorian engineers in the county is not lost for good. A private approach has already been made to English Heritage, but the cost of a restoration project is such that private capital must be involved. The danger is that a tourist-gawping extravaganza

such as those at some of the North Wales slate mines would result. Meanwhile a few of us are prepared to take round small private parties for no charge other than a pint or two in the Scafell afterwards. This, at least is a beginning.

