

26th & 27th October 1991
Coniston Copper Mines

Visit Of The Great Orme Exploration Society

Meet Leader: Peter Fleming

Eight members of the above society (G.O.E.S) arrived in Coniston at 6 pm. on the Friday evening, five staying in B & B accommodation and 3 in the B.M.S.C. Cottage.

The following morning at 10.30 am under a cloudy sky, we gathered at the cottage. Only three C.A.T. members arrived to act as hosts and guides other than the meet leader. They were Alisdair Cameron, Chris Jones and Trevor Tucker. After a brief introductory talk on the history and extent of the Coniston Coppermines we set off up into the mist to Levers Water and "the Backstrings".

I had been advised in advance that most "G.O.E.S" members attending would like to visit the more remote areas of the mines and were conversant with S.R.T. techniques. Accordingly a rather ambitious day's trip had been planned. This involved entering and exploring Levers Water mine then abseiling down via the old ladderway 200 ft to the bottom of Brow Stope, scrambling up into Top Level Extension, exploring this and then on to Arête Chamber, down the Paddy End through trip and out of Hospital Level. As far as I know this has never before been done all in one day. However, I did not mention this until I knew the outcome would be successful.

Trevor Tucker and I led this group, who were very impressed by the colourful secondary copper deposits, i.e. the "Blue Lagoon", etc., in Levers Water Mine. To our surprise we found the first three pitches down Brow Stope were already rigged, but not very competently. We improved the hangs and fitted maillons where required. We assumed that the ropes had been left in by an Outdoor Pursuits Centre.

At the bottom of Brow Stope we met Chris Jones who had entered by the Crater Route and had rigged the traverse across "MAGS" catwalk for us. He had with him two lads who had travelled all the way from Cornwall having heard that Coniston Coppermines were worth seeing. Chris had shown them through Top Level Extension. We then did the same for the North Wales group. They saw the ore wagon, the jackroll windlass and "Earthquake Passage" etc.

We then returned via MAGs catwalk to Arête Chamber and started the descent of the Paddy End through trip. Everything went smoothly. All areas of Top and Middle Levels were shown. By now the visitors were saying how surprised they were at the size and complexity of the mine and were thoroughly enjoying the trip. At this point I told them it would be the first time this route has been followed in its entirety in one go and they were very pleased about this. We carried on down the last pitch into Grey Crag Level and reached Hospital Level mouth at 5.30 pm., having taken about six hours for the whole trip.

Alistair Cameron took the other three "GOES" members into the Arête Chamber area and then the Levers Water Mine tour. This was followed by the Hospital/Grey Crag Level system. Over a bar meal in the Black Bull that evening it was evident that they were all delighted at the day's activities.

On Sunday morning only Mike Mitchell came to assist and show the flag for C.A.T. An easy day was planned, we were to follow the route of our Coniston Coppermines leaflet, which sells so well in the village, but to start with a visit into Deep Level was included, where its history and features were described.

We then showed them the pump rods in the Old Engine Shaft and the restoration work we have nearly completed on the sheaved winding wheel at the top. The various wheelpits in the Red Dell area were examined. They showed much interest in the site of the old blacksmiths forge near the New Engine Shaft and said it ought to be carefully and thoroughly excavated. Then followed a visit to Flemings Mine area. After this, Triddle Incline was climbed and the Triddle Shaft entered to see the balance bob. We then crossed over the ridge to Levers Water.

I was particularly keen for them to have a good look at the surface remains between Simons Nick and the tarn. I believe this area could provide evidence to the expert eye to support my theory that very early mining could have taken place here which would pre-date existing documentary evidence (1599). The Great Orme Exploration Society, as recently as 1988, proved that prehistoric mining took place in their area. With the assistance of the British Museum and carbon dating, Bronze Age workings for copper at depths of up to 200 ft below the surface have been proved, dating from 1800 BC. So important and extensive were the finds which included stone and bone tools, that a number of their members founded a limited company "Great Orme Mines Limited". They opened a show mine, museum and cafe. It opened in April this year and has had 40,000 visitors in six months. (See Early Mining in the British Isles - C.A.T. Library)

So with this group of experts including at least one of the directors, we spent some time examining in detail the ground and remains above the Back Strings. This included Simons Nick and the nearby buddle site we excavated two years ago. It did not take them long to spot a stone mortar with two round depressions on one side. Soon a second was discovered, having three depressions on one side and two on the other. I catch on quickly and found a third, but this one was broken. These mortar stones, sometimes called ore dressing stones or anvils, were used for crushing ore by hand, using stone or iron hammers and were in use over a very long period of time, starting in the prehistoric period and were still in use in the eighteen hundreds. This discovery could be the first one proving the use of stone implements in the Coniston Copper Mines (but not necessarily dating back to Prehistoric times).

Our friends from North Wales were very enthusiastic about this area and had said previously that it would only be a matter of time before someone proved that prehistoric mining took place in Lakeland and this area could be a contender. A statement which I would agree with. (A few moments later, what appears to be the roof of an Elizabethan

"coffin" level was noticed.) Time was getting short, so we descended via Boulder Valley and Paddy End workings, back to the cottage, where the group thanked us warmly for our hospitality and said they would like to return again during the winter, having been very impressed by what they had seen.

Conclusion

The weekend meet was a success from the point of view of both Societies. "G.O.E.S have broadened their knowledge of the Coniston Mining Field under our guidance. Some said the Saturday Trip was the most interesting one they have ever had, whilst the general walkabout on Sunday inspired them to say they would return in future.

From our point of view, their knowledge of early mining drew our attention to artifacts and features we had overlooked, which could lead (with expert archaeological supervision) to quite important discoveries being made. If a serious investigation is eventually undertaken on this site C.A.T. should be heavily involved. We deserve some recognition after twelve years of exploring and documenting Coniston Coppermines.

I was surprised and disappointed at the very poor turnout by C.A.T. members to support this meet and welcome the Great Orme Exploration Society. Most of them were very knowledgeable and interesting people, with a kindred interest from whom we could learn a lot. They assisted in carrying gear and pitch rigging, which I felt they should not have been expected to do. Finally, I should like to thank the following members, who came and worked hard to make the weekend a memorable one: Alistair Cameron, Chris Jones, Trevor Tucker and Mike Mitchell.

PETER FLEMING