

Uncovered — the plug that seals a lake

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For decades a half-believed tale has circulated in Coniston that the mountain tarn Lvers Water is stopped by a giant oak plug which, if breached, would cause a flood.

Now a group of mines explorers have found it—a six-foot-high by four-foot-wide oak barrier in a tunnel 40 ft below the tarn. The "stopper" is probably more than 150 years old.

The plug was discovered during exploration of the Top Level workings at Coniston Copermines, which also revealed railways, ore wagons—and even miners' clogs—left undisturbed since the turn of the century.

Challenge

It is the most significant set of discoveries since the Cumbria Amenity Trust began its exploration of the Coniston mines eight years ago.

The trust began as a small group of enthusiasts who saw the practically unexplored Coniston Copermines as a major challenge.

Workings going back to the late 1500's were explored around West Dell and Paddy End, revealing veins of copper, vertical passages hundreds of feet deep and occasionally equipment left by the miners.

Exploration co-ordinator Pete Fleming said: "We had to adapt the latest pot-holing and mountaineering techniques and in many instances had to put in fresh timber rock and rubble to ensure safe passage."

There were accidents—an underground avalanche nearly sent one explorer tumbling into a deep chasm. One member tripped and only a timber baulk, which broke his leg, prevented a long fall.

But by last winter they were ready to explore to top level workings around Lvers Water—an opening to which had been spotted four years earlier—and an ambitious programme of digging and showing up collapsed tunnels began.

Pete said "We found a soft shaft, highly coloured with copper carbonate, at the top of which we discovered another tunnel which led directly beneath Lvers Water."

"We discovered it was completely sealed by a wooden

barrier and came to the conclusion we had found the long lost tunnel which had been deliberately sealed when the level of Lvers Water was raised to provide water power to the mines."

He added: "This plug was the subject of local hearsay in Coniston, passed down over the generations. Many just laughed and didn't believe it existed."

The first villager they told of the find was 80-year-old Harry Bolton who had originally told Trust members of the plug tale which had been passed on through his family. Pete said: "From what we have heard if the barrier was breached the level of Lvers Water would drop by 40 ft and the water would surge down through the Copermines."

He added: "Although that was a highlight it was relatively small in comparison with the extent of the workings we had dug open."

In addition to 700 yards of passage and worked out veins initially found, the removal of a major collapse opened out a further 1,000 yards of workings—and the entire system was still accessible.

Pete said: "It was as left by the miners departing at the turn of the century... the tunnels were complete with railway lines of varying patterns and two full-sized ore wagons."

There were a water-driven ventilation system, hand-operated windlasses, drills—and even clogs and water flasks abandoned by the miners.

Equipment

A side passage contained a vein of Cobalt—a mineral very rare in the Lake District—and a climbing chain led to a platform on a level between Brim Fell which was probably the last working place in the mines.

All the equipment has been left in place so that other students of industrial archaeology and people interested in mines exploration can go and see them in their natural environment.

Pete said: "Some of the items would be too large to recover anyway but we feel that those who are interested and competent to visit the workings with expert guides should be able to see them