

18th October 1987

Honister

REPORT OF C.A.T. TRIP TO HONISTER QUARRIES 18th. OCT. 1987.

Hurricane Helen hit Cumbria in the early hours of the morning of Sunday October 18th. At about 10 am the eye of the hurricane was passing down Borrowdale as valiant C.A.T. members were driving the other way. Keeping the cars on the road proved to be the hardest task of the day.

On top of Honister Hause rain came horizontally and becks were blown upwards into waterspouts. There was only one sensible place to be (other than home in bed) and that was underground. Therefore without any delay twelve C.A.T. members and one guest struggled into their gear and disappeared into Link Level at the base of Honister Crag for 6 hours of exploration. Honister Slate Mine is a marvellous museum to the history of slate working in the Lake District. Much of the older workings have not been destroyed by more recent activity. It's an explorer's paradise. In the Middle Ages slate was being won from the crag by simple techniques of small surface workings and short tunnels. It was only in the late 1700's and 1800's that increased activity produced the need for a concerted attempt to improve the methods of getting slate off the crag. In fact the most interesting aspect of the workings to the industrial archaeologist isn't the closeheads and working areas but the remains of the methods used to transport slate from deep inside the crag to the road at the top of the Hause.

Initially slate was "sledged" down the scree on wooden sledges fitted with rudimentary brakes. During the 1800's the external incline was constructed much of which still remains as a magnificent monument to Victorian engineering. The incline followed the natural strata of the rock right up the crag face to link the entrances to the various levels. This construction is best viewed from the slopes of Dale Head on the opposite side of the pass.

Honister's notorious weather must have taken its toll of the external incline. Maintenance costs would have been very high. Engineers of the day showed tremendous imagination when they designed and constructed a replacement inside the mountain and subsequently many years later this was replaced by another internal incline further across the crag face.

Once inside the Link Level C.A.T. members were able to strip off their wet outdoor clothing and take stock of the situation in comfort. The Link Level is itself an interesting feature. Driven horizontally along the base and parallel with the face never more than 20 ft. inside the crag, it linked two areas formerly served by an aerial cableway outside. In the 1930's it was a common sight for travellers climbing the pass to see large clogs of slate suspended in mid air being carried by the cableway. Wear and tear and Honister's notorious freak winds took their toll. The cableway fell into disuse to be replaced by the Link Level.

The Link connects the two main areas of slate mining inside the crag. Both areas are associated with the internal inclines. These are cut at an angle of about 40 degrees to the horizontal. Each incline runs from the foot of the crag to a point close to the top. At frequent "stations" up each incline tunnels run off further into the hill and most end in "closeheads" (caverns). Several of the caverns interconnect forming large open voids. Also from most of the "stations", tunnels run the opposite way opening to day on the crag face. It was from these openings that spoil was tipped to cascade down the buttresses and crash to the scree below. Few rock climbers bothered to pioneer new routes on Honister Crag in the early days.

The incline towards the east end of the workings was the first one inspected by the party. This construction is referred to as the New Incline and it is still in complete working order. Unlike other similar constructions elsewhere, this one is not self activating or counterbalanced. The slate trolley is lowered by cable from a winding drum sited at the top of the incline. The drum is driven from an electric motor via a massive worm reduction gear.

The party ascended the incline making use of the access ladders. A number of levels and closeheads were inspected on the way as was the winding gear at the incline head. It was while at the head of the incline that an interesting discovery was made. In a higher access tunnel which had previously been considered a ventilation tunnel, a large sheathed wheel was found. It was well supported in a massive framework and was orientated to the angle of the incline. Could this indicate that the incline had once contained self activating or counterbalanced mechanism or perhaps it was just an aid during the construction and commissioning of the incline.

Having inspected everything there was to see at the incline head including some very artistic graffiti on the walls of the winding cabin it was getting near lunchtime. However before descending for butties and hot coffee a quick diversion was made to the top window in Honister Crag to look out to day and view Hurricane Helen which, if anything, appeared to be getting worse.

After refreshments the group proceeded along Link Level and prepared to explore a much older part of the system. In the last years of the 19th Century, Victorian engineers built the "old" incline. This was to replace the even older external incline and runs parallel to the external one approximately 120 ft inside the crag.

Unlike the New Incline this one was designed to operate by the counterbalanced system. The counterbalanced "dog" can still be seen at the incline foot and the slate trolley lies off the rails near the top. It wouldn't take much to get the incline back into working order perhaps another project for C.A.T?

The party spent several hours exploring the environs of the incline. The design of tunnelling was very similar to that seen earlier in the day. Levels connected the incline with closeheads deep in the mountain and other tunnels ran out to day on spectacular situations on the crag face. Such was the ferocity of the storm outside that some

connections with the outside world were covered with a curtain of falling water.

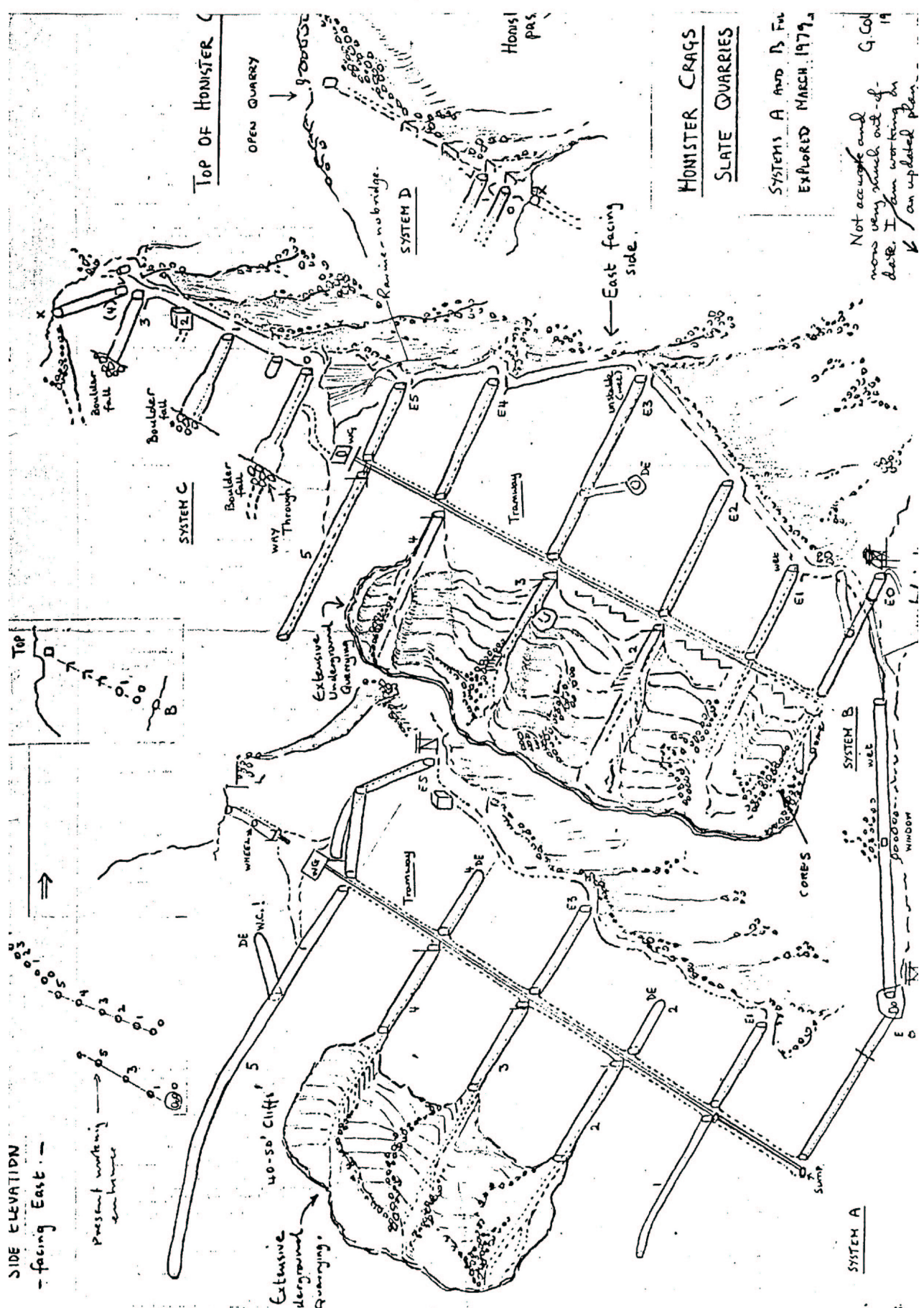
Before departing an attempt was made by a few of the party to force a way up through ancient workings above the incline head. Other members of the party wandered off along lower levels. The spirit of adventure seemed to have gripped C.A.T. members and the meet leader rapidly lost control. It took some time to round everyone up and do a head count. The attempt at exploring the area above the incline was eventually abandoned.

At the head of the incline we were virtually at the top of the crag. It seemed that the only sensible course of action was to go out to day, brave the storm and make for the walkers path down from Fleetwith Pike. It was very satisfying to have climbed Honister Crag underground and spend so many hours on such a wet day completely dry and comfortable.

It turned out that getting back to the cars wasn't the end of the day's adventures. Although we didn't know it the storm had closed the main roads through the Lakes and as most C.A.T. members were heading for Coniston / Furness we were due for a difficult journey. We were soon turned back from the Thirlmere and then the St. Johns- in-the Vale roads and although one car managed Kirkstone, most ended up detouring to the M6. Some of us even came to grief in Keswick.

Members:-

Alistair Cameron (ML)
Ian Matheson
Mike Mitchell
Anton CP Thomas
Sheila CP Thomas
Sheila Barker
Mark Scott
Paul Timewell
Don Borthwick
Dave Bridge
Angela Wilson
Dave Blundell
Allan Chesterworth (guest)



**HONISTER CRAGGS
SLATE QUARRIES**

SYSTEMS A AND B FULL
EXPLORED MARCH 1979

Not accurate and
now very much out of
date. I am working on
an updated plan.

SYSTEM A