Background

A little over a year ago on an evening trip to Braich Goch we were greeted by a newly installed steel gate across the adit, albeit the door had kindly been left unlocked. It was soon apparent that something was afoot, with rumours that a show mine would be opened to complement King Arthur’s Labyrinth, which occupies the lower level of the workings.

The history of show slate mines in North Wales is dominated by Llechwedd’s Quarry Tours and the now-closed Gloddfa Ganol, with Llechwedd in particular making considerable modifications to the original workings in order to make them tourist-friendly and to enable the throughput of large numbers of people. With this in mind, the thought of such a development at Braich Goch did raise some concerns.

However, skip forwards to this summer and we had the opportunity to find out exactly what was going on at Braich Goch, where we were met by the ever-cheerful Mark Waite, who is the driving force behind what has become ‘Corris Mine Explorers’.

Corris Mine Explorers

Mark is a first and foremost a mine explorer; and one to whom the idea of a sanitised show mine with neat gravel floors and fixed lighting is an abhorrence - and that’s a great relief.

The concept of Corris Mine Explorers is something very special because it’s designed to be as close to the real thing as it’s possible to get: in fact, it is the real thing.
On arrival at the Corris Craft Centre, would-be mine explorers are greeted by Mark and equipped with a helmet and an Oldham caplamp before heading into the hillside. Cowstails are provided to ensure that explorers can safely gaze out across some of the massive chambers.

People joining Corris Mine Explorers will be doing exactly what many of us do at the weekend; and (even though it’s a guided tour) each trip will differ depending on the wishes of the visitors and the speed at which they want to see things.

Braich Goch underground

In order to open up Braich Goch to the (paying) public, the mine has been approved by the relevant governing bodies after many inspections; and by a strange co-incidence, the inspector himself once worked at Braich Goch. The mine has also been licensed by the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority, which enables trips for young people to be held.

In order to be approved, anywhere that people are taken must have two exit routes - and for the majority of the mine this has been relatively easy to achieve. However, in one instance this has required the construction of a new stairway down the side of one chamber, but against expectations, this has been done very much in the style of an original rock-cut stairway and it doesn’t impinge upon the fabric of the mine.

This is very much in line with what Mark has wanted to achieve and he admits that if the requirements had been to change the character of the mine; or to impose emergency lights and shiny steelwork on Braich Goch, then Corris Mine Explorers would never have happened.

Aside from a few sheer drops that have had a rope fixed across them, there have been very few noticeable changes to the mine - and even these are little different to the fixed rigging that decorates mines across the country, as installed by ‘bona fide’ mine explorers.

Passages that needed blocking off have been secured with original rusty chains and it’s very hard to tell that Mark has spent the better part of a winter ensuring that Braich Goch is a safe place for the uninitiated. That work has stretched as far as the removal of more modern rubbish and graffiti, returning the mine as close as possible to the condition it was in on the day it was abandoned.
The Tour

‘Taster’ trips last for around an hour and a half and the full tour is half a day, between three and a half and four hours underground. In order to keep things manageable, trips must be pre-booked and are subject to a maximum of ten people.

The tour starts on Floor 5, which is reached by walking through the woods from the Corris Craft Centre: there is no paved walkway, no steps or any other concession to bureaucracy, making is just like ‘real’ mine exploring. The only noticeable difference comes at the entrance, where a shiny new gate blocks the adit: in the dark behind this, the trip proper begins.

Towards the end of the adit, we spot a length of rope bolted to the wall - it’s a safety line, but generally these aren’t required in tunnels: Mark explains that this is here to allow visitors to get used to using cowstails before they actually need them.

Then it’s off heading south through a 2’ square hole set into a wall that blocks the main tunnel along the level, which provides the first challenge for those who were expecting a sanitised show mine. The level continues beyond for some distance to a collapsed chamber, but the main attraction is a first glimpse into the depths of the chambers below, made misty by the ‘breath of a dragon’ in King Arthur’s Labyrinth, way below.

As a first glimpse of a slate mine, caught in the warm glow of an Oldham, this only gives a hint of what’s to come, yet it’s still going to make a big impression on visitors. From here, it’s along the level to see a well-preserved winch, something of a rarity these days.

The trip continues, back through the hole in the wall and then northwards. As this level is immediately above the Labyrinth, visitors will occasionally have to switch their lights off and watch in the darkness as a tour goes past below them, but that’s only going to add to the feeling of seeing something they wouldn’t usually see: a backstage pass is always sought-after and the fact that this is one is done in the pitch dark only serves to make it more valuable.

One of the highlights of the trip lies towards the far end of the mine, in the form of the steep underground incline, which is laid on a bed of wooden sleepers: this is unique in the North Wales slate industry and gives a perfect chance for Mark to explain how slate was moved inside the mountain.

An ascent up the side of a chamber leads to the final part of the mine to be worked, where part-developed chambers illustrate exactly how slate was extracted, something that can be hard to envisage from a worked-out chamber. Here, an abandoned waste truck rests below a roof covered with the names of miners; while beyond lies the remains of a winch and motor once “borrowed” from Aberllefenni and never returned.
The upper areas of Braich Goch are still relatively rich in artefacts; and this has been enhanced by Mark gathering up some finds and moving them to comparative safety where they are less likely to get trodden on. Again, this gives a good opportunity to illustrate working methods and underground life to visitors, in a way that a conventional museum display never can never hope to replicate.

Similarly, the chambers offer sufficient variety to illustrate mining technique, with one chamber in particular demonstrating how workings were advanced, with the strange sight of the remains of a tunnel cut into the hanging wall, now stranded above 40' of free space that the visitor will gaze across to see the continuation of the level on which they’re standing, far away in the darkness, a relic of a long-lost time.

Finally, after about three and a half to four hours in the dark, visitors reach the Floor 4 adit, ‘Vanes level’ and the warm feeling of achievement at having journeyed through the mountain to emerge elsewhere. From there, it’s a scramble down through the woods to the Corris Craft Centre, where the Oldham caplamp will be swapped for a return to modern life; and just maybe, a new-found desire to return underground.

Conclusions

Corris Mine Explorers is something very different from the way in which ‘show mines’ have been operated so far: gone is the veneer and the remodeling of the underground environment; and gone is the ‘one size fits all’ approach to tourism. They’ve been replaced by an experience of genuine mine exploring, in an effectively untouched and unaltered slate mine, led by someone who knows the place and the background better than anyone else.

In all, the Braich Goch trip covers about two miles and two levels of a large slate mine: it passes through tunnels and chambers, with a lot of variation and features to illustrate what slate mining was all about: because the trips will be done in small groups, this means that people will get plenty of time to pick Mark’s brains and come away having achieved something very unique; and hopefully learned a lot, too.

It is, very much, the perfect introduction to mine exploring.

Acknowledgements

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