

3 men + 1 dinghy

Underground adventures in North Wales by Fearsome Phil

It was my own fault of course. I am a rational, intelligent adult, able to make my own decisions based on sound reason and logic. But throw Mad Mike into the equation and the majority of these go out of the window. Mad Mike (MM) inhabited the room next to mine when we worked at an Outdoor Centre, thus creating the only area where the cleaners refused to go. MM was the one who suggested we attempt the Bob Graham Round with two weeks' notice and next to no training. He was the one who spent 29 hours in a Spanish cave with no remaining lights, rebelaying in the dark and it was MM who heard about these two slate mines in Wales, accidentally connected by miners in the 1800s. A friend of his had spent many hours of research in the Pfestiniog archives, scratching around underground, swimming lakes, climbing hanging chains slightly faster than they were moving towards him and making irreversible abseils into vast unstable underground quarries. All this appealed to Mad Mike — he wanted to make that connection. Our attempt failed as we were relying on a taped account on Dictaphone his friend made from recollections of his trip several years earlier. Hence little details became confused, like left and right, up and down. MM returned, refusing to let go, like a Jack Russell with a rat, and made the through trip. He recounted the adventure with enthusiasm, reliving the sharp edged abseils, dinghying the lakes and, worst of all, the rotting bridges above flooded chambers. His biggest regret was not capturing it on film. Unfortunately, I possess a waterproof camera and, after several bottles of duty free, I was persuaded to embark on a journalist's career.

I had several conditions before I was prepared to go back. We should take buoyancy aids (what if the dinghy burst?), rock boots (I knew I'd be pointed at any climbs), a lot of rope (the originals were left by MM's friend) and finally we should have a third person (I get nervous spending too much time in MM's company — his penchant for pushing the boat out is contagious). Powerful Pete (PP) was the ideal choice — a married man with sound judgment and loads of old rope, he readily agreed commenting that it was too outrageous to miss, after some more duty free had been consumed.

The original plan involved meeting at my house, then travelling across to bivvy in the entrance but disaster struck in the form of a leak in our dinghy so we spent a hapless hour trying to find it, eventually retiring to the pub. As a result the 6.30am start didn't happen and we set off a mere two hours behind schedule. To make matters worse the previously drivable track to the entrance adit was now churned up so we trudged the last mile laden with PP's

antiquated hawsers, the remains of the beer inhibiting our athletic abilities.

Gearing up at the start we looked a rather eccentric trio in a combination of canoe cags, rucksacks, Whillans harnesses, buoyancy aids and our trusty dingy. Having put all the gear on we found we couldn't squeeze through the entrance grill so took it all off again. An inauspicious start...

Trudging through the horizontal adit our eyes grew accustomed to the yellow light of our headtorches. The first feature was a furnace at the end of the adit, presumably for ventilation. Evidence of the period when the mine was used for storing explosives in the 1930s appeared in the shape of an office on the right, complete with desk. Beyond this was an enormous flooded chamber which MM had

explored by dinghy during our earlier attempt. He hadn't reached the end on our 50m rope...

A dodgy climb on wet, soot-covered slate above the furnace led to a long incline. We communicated in hushed voices as we avoided large blocks, obviously recently departed from the roof. Progress at the top was prevented by an iron grill. We knew we had to abseil down to the chamber on our left, connected by a short tunnel. A fixed rope led over the edge. We backed it up with one of our own and PP committed himself first. I brought up the rear, the reality of the situation hitting as I immediately lost contact with the rock for the 30m drop.

The first chamber was vast, littered with garage-sized boulders. MM was unsure of the way and I shuddered at the thought of retreat up the first abseil. We carefully picked a way through, looking for the second abseil. With relief we spotted the ropes still in place from MM's previous adventure. Why relief was the reaction to a further advance in commitment is beyond me — especially considering the slate-sharp edges that the rope snaked over into the darkness. Once descended this led to a smaller chamber, flooded to the left. We knew this was the area which the miners broke into from the other workings. Having found the small hole it was evident that it had been left in its original state — loose blocks and a squeeze showed that no attempt had been made to tidy the tunnel.

Dropping through we immediately picked up the rail tracks in the next mine. The slate appeared much less shattered and the tunnel felt infinitely more secure than the looming caverns with uncertain ceilings. This rush of security was swiftly shattered when we reached the first of the bridges... Railtrack wide and suspended from the roof by two thin iron shafts, it appeared to be in the twilight of its years. The thought did cross my mind that maybe we were

The old railway tracks flexed alarmingly as I oh-so-carefully shifted my weight forward. My headtorch reflected in the black depthless water 40ft below causing me to lose all concept of perspective and distance. The hawser rope I was trailing pulled insistently as I shuffled along feeling as far out on a limb as I ever want to be. As I questioned once again the wisdom of this subterranean trip, Powerful Pete's words repeated in my head... "this certainly takes the piss out of an afternoon at a climbing wall."