too. With some satisfaction MM told us that this was the
most complete of all the bridges. I decided it was time for a
cigarette. In retrospect it wasn’t too bad although the wood
did feel rather spongy underfoot and the black water beneath
— some way beneath — glimpsed through the missing
sleepers did nothing to calm my rapidly fraying nerves.

Safely (although I hesitate to use the word during this
account) across, a short section of tunnel led to the next
impasse. It ended above another flooded chamber and all
that remained of bridge number two was a lonely suspen-
sion strut 30ft away. MM went quiet, PP said “shit” and I
rolled another cigarette. Fortunately our mentor remembered
that the way ahead meant a blind traverse around the walls
of the chamber. Before you could say “which rope do you
want?” he’d gone, leaving PP and myself to rope up and
grop around the corner to better holds and a spacious ledge
halfway. A fixed rope meant a safer, if rather wild swing
across from the ledge to the continuation tunnel. This
detour around a further chamber until we were confronted
with the infamous bridge number three. MM had regaled us
with stories of rotting beams, swaying central supports and
bent over nails to get snagged on. However even he
blanched at the sight of what remained. From our tunnel two
loose rail tracks about six inches apart led to the central
beam supported by two iron poles attached somehow to
the roof. These weren’t familiar, reliable BR tracks, but tracks
19th century style — two inches wide and very flexible. A
wooden beam led all the way across but was evidently
rotten on our side. A changeover from the tracks to the second
section of this beam was the only possible way on.

A further beam which was there 15 months earlier on
MM’s trip had joined the sleepers in the water below — not
very encouraging. There seemed to be two decisions to
make — both rather palpable. The first was whoever
crosses first, should they attach a sling to the dubious
central support as a runner? The plus was it would limit
the swing if they fell, the minus being that if the whole bridge
collapsed they would be attached to a large tonnage of iron
and wood, limiting the efficiency of their buoyancy aid
somewhat.

The second decision was who should go first to set up
the altogether safe Tyrolean? So it was that I found myself
shuffling across trailing the Tyrolean rope. To this day I
don’t know the process behind this decision. All right, PP is
a family man, but surely he’s insured? And MM had done it
before and we all know that there’s no substitute for
experience...

With some relief I reached the middle support. Deciding
to take the fall into the water rather than the tonnage I
passed on the runner option and delicately transferred on
to the beam. The nails had been bent over by MM’s friend
using a hammer. How he managed to do anything except
stay astride the beam is a marvel of circus techniques.
Despite being bent over, the nails still snagged on gear and
pulled at nerves, causing some alarming contortions to free
myself. Pure survival instinct enabled me to reach the far
end and shakily roll a cigarette before setting up the
Tyrolean using a couple of dubious iron spikes. The boys,
secured by cowstails went through their own personal
nightmare and we were three again.

The final technical section remained between us and the
relatively straightforward exit. In the gloom we could see at
least two pairs of decaying suspension struts, all that
remained of bridge four. The other side of the lake wasn’t
visible by headtorch. It was apparent that we needed to
abseil, lowering our dirty and take it in turns to paddle
across. The process was complicated by the lack of ledges
on our side. This dictated that we should lower the dinghy
(bought in Porthmadog, and called Navigator 2 ‘only to be
used with adult supervision in calm water’) until it was
directly below, abseil on to it (clearing slate off our feet)
and immediately lie flat to prevent
capsize. We needed
some light rope to
tow Navigator 2 back
and to our delight we found
a polypropylene cord
leading down to the
water. Pulling it in,
our delight gave way to
amazement as we
discovered a flat
dingly tied to the
end. We couldn’t
but help wonder
at the story behind it —
anyone out there have
any missing friends
with a tendency
towards the
bizarre, last seen in Wales? It
certainly helped to
explain the foot pump
we’d found after bridge three.

We each abseiled and made our crossing of the dark
waters, a remarkably peaceful affair, save for the re-
discovery of the leak in the dinghy. The peace was disturbed
as PP fell out of the boat at the far end. Fortunately, we were
able to save Navigator, and PP saved himself.

I had noble intentions of free climbing the short but
tricky climb out of the lake despite the rope left hanging by
our guide’s previous connection. I had even donned some
rock boots for the purpose. Fixing a jumar to the rope I
stepped on to the rock, immediately falling off. The fear of
what the rope was tied to had me yarning up it like a great
big yarning thing. Having top roped the others up you could
tell the tension slowly disappear as we could feel a strong
draught and knew the exit to daylight was relatively easy.
The only problem was that MM couldn’t remember the
route. A few false alarms found us reversing some sections.
During these times PP and I exchanged fearful glances,
thinking of how we would rather have anaesthetic-free hip
replacements than go back the way we had come. Eventu-
ally, daylight filtered through allowing us to locate the final
boulder slopes and emerge through the awesome exit hole
into the surface workings. Having survived, we did feel
quite pleased with ourselves and manly handshaking and
backslapping ensured. PP was a little chilly in the breeze as
a result of his dip, dictating a rapid walk over the mountain
and back to the car. It was strange how the colours looked
more intense, the sound seemed sharper and the air sweeter
than a few hours earlier. Such are the rewards of adventure.

Postscript

The more astute reader will have noticed that neither the
mines nor the participants have been named. The reason for
the latter is that all of us make a living from instructing and
we wouldn’t like to feel that future employers/NGB’s view
us as irresponsible as a result of our day out (in?). (The
typist knows who you are and she thinks you’re all certifi-
cable.)

And the former? The aim of this article is not to recommend
the trip — possibly the opposite. If the trip became popular and
an incident occurred (which it inevitably would, given the state
of some of the structures) the “authorities” would almost
certainly bar entrance, as in the case of Pennamoch mines. We
hope that it does highlight the alternative adventure to be had
with diligent exploration in Wales and who knows, if you are
committed enough (in both senses of the word) you may
stumble upon these mines....