

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 suspension 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 grope 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 detoured 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 18 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 unpalatable. 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 dingy 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 dingy (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 dinghy tied to the end. We couldn't help but 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 yarding up it like a great big yarding thing. Having top roped the others up you could sense 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. Eventually, 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 certifiable.)

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 Penmachno 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...



Above: A tentative crossing of one of the rickety old railway tracks.