

Devis Hole Mine, Swaledale – An Adventure in Mine Exploration and Caving

We heard through the grapevine that a team of local cavers (of the “digging” variety) had “reopened” a mine entrance in Swaledale, Yorkshire Dales. We sensed potential glory in finding the missing link between this mine and the next valley that had been reported in “old times” and rumoured by local stories. On the other hand, maybe we just had a fetish for being frozen solid on a February morning whilst changing into gear on an exposed wintery road near to the mine and putting ourselves at deathly risk in a collapsed mine system.

Devis Hole is a lead ore mine around 100 years old. It had been a huge "dig" involving a cast of thousands including women and small children. I guess we turned up a bit too late to join that fun. The mine was mostly dry. It was littered with debris left by the original miners - buckets, grease mugs, spikes and rods, rails, old ropes, chisels and a few ore tubs. The mine was well cleaned out. We only found a few small pieces of Galina or residue in veins. The floors are mainly silt and compressed mud. The mine interfaces with a natural cave system and some passages are walking size. The passages show evidence of drill markings and chisel chipping. Some coral fossils can be seen. Clog prints are everywhere.

This account also includes an account of a caver on fire. Yes, we had our own mobile smoking gun. Given the maze that we were about to enter, would the six person team be able to stay together? Read on...

For some, the day started with a civilized full English breakfast at a friend's house. Getting a good intake of calories before a trip is an essential part of caving. What a wonderful sport! His wife had her coffee in bed, the baby was fed and my friend left without any guilt at leaving his family behind as he had sufficient brownie points for the day trip out.

En route we stopped for a coffee and due to a lack of local entrepreneurial spirit everywhere - all cafes closed, we ended up at the Serendipity Café in Leyburn. This was a cross between a Laura Ashley store and the Acropolis. It was a bit posh and we were very self-conscious that we were a bit scruffy. We admired the murals, including pictures of Greek columns and white doves, exchanged Valentine's Day stories of love and sex from the day before and paid the £2.00 a cup bill.

It was a very cold day and changing by the roadside was not a happy experience, with damp gear icing up as it was unloaded. One person's oversuit zip was broken but we were impressed with the imaginative use of criss-crossed shoe lacing to hold the suit together, somewhat kinky but appealing in design.

We made our way to the mine entrance. This is along the Cogden Gill above the Old Smelting Mill. We followed the right hand branch of the Gill (western direction) for a few yards. The entrance is a timbered shaft dropping into a level passage. The team climbed down and did a low hands and knees crawl for a short distance. The roof is unstable and roof beams have rotted away. Great care is needed to avoid physical contact with roof boulders, or "dead ends" as sometimes called. One has to be careful to avoid waist belt held caving batteries brushing against any unstable features. Looking back after the crawl makes this clear – you think to yourself have I really just come through that!!.

The passageway becomes higher, an oil drum lined (very rusty and degraded) left-hand passage is passed and after about 400 ft we turned left into Pearson's passage. This lies under a huge central maze. This maze is phreatic (formed by water under pressure over a long period) and made up of over a mile of natural cave passageways which are concentrated into no more than about 400ft by 150ft. At one point, some kind soul has scribed a map on the walls. We followed it and ended up at exactly where we started. Thanks mate. The maze is very complex and resembles a "New York road map".

Bypassing this maze we continued along the main level for 385ft to a 4-way junction. We had made the effort to bring some video equipment and we each occasionally performed for the camera.

I think that it was at this point that one of the team showed what HOT STUFF he is! As the rest of the team gathered at the junction, he then arrived with a video camera and tackle bag in tow. A strange smell arrived with him. It wasn't obvious at first. There was a shout out towards him that something was wrong. The plume of smoke arising from his tackle bag was now obvious to all. He, not noticing, gave a look of confusion and suspected a wind up. But it wasn't the case.

The smoking tackle bag was inspected. This revealed that the powerful battery used to provide a light source for the video work had been shorting strongly, burning plastic and cables. We were pleased to discover that this would not be the first case of caving human spontaneous combustion as we had feared but a technical blip.

Fortunately the coffee flask was rescued from the smouldering bag, as it seemed a good time for a "Maxwell House" moment. The blackened flask looked like a used cannon shell and it was not a surprise that its thermal qualities were compromised but the cold coffee was better than nothing at all.

At this 4-way junction we took a left into the east level into a series of mine passages which had some natural features. We passed over several shafts in the

floor, which ended in a previous "dig" area in collapsed mine passage. This had only just been breached a few weeks before around Christmas. Going through this we entered another section of mined passage. This was partly railed (as in train type rails) and we walked on the rails to avoid trampling the many clog prints. We passed another shaft and then rigged another shaft, which was over 80ft deep and which had deep water at the bottom, a large wooden ladder protruding from the watery depths.

Some descended by Single Rope Techniques, others by flexible Aluminum ladders (which we carried with us) to a 50ft point at which we swung onto a rusty iron scaffold bar onto another level. We followed the left railed passage to a junction and walked right. This led across a shaft. Some shafts could, with care, be traversed along the unstable edges. Some metal rails had been used to support a person's weight crossing the ledge. We came to a shaft where the original miners had dug down and then upwards into a vein of iron ore. To get into the mined rift you need to take a brave jump/leap across the void landing on some rusty rails. Two team members made the brave leaping step across whilst the most intelligent of the group watched prayerfully awaiting news of their finds. The return journey was made safely. There was some huffing and panting on the ascending of the shaft attached to a rope lifeline operated via a pulley we had fixed before we descended.

There was one incident. Somebody (who cannot be named for legal reasons) caused a boulder to roll onto someone's foot. I guess we should wear clogs next time we visit Devis Hole Mine.

I cannot vouch for the passage directions described in this account but as all films end "any resemblance of the above account to real persons living or dead is purely coincidental."

Lionel Rice