Aditnow Sir Francis Level Trip (+ Gunnerside Magical Mystery Tour)
15th May 2010
Official attendees: bri hache, christwigg, davel, jones the slate, RJV, RockChick, skimble
Stowaways: Dave and Wayne

We met in Gunnerside village at 11am on a lovely morning to find ourselves serenaded by a team of Morris Dancers, it would be a little rich to say anything about unusual hobbies and judging by how drunk they all appeared to be at such an early hour it seems like perhaps they have the right idea after all.
A few of our group then took the opportunity to expose themselves to the gathered crowds and don their wetsuits in the middle of the village, whilst the rest preferred to change further up the valley.
Good progress was made up through Birkbeck Wood and to the Old Gang dressing floor near Sir Francis Level.

Bouse Teams and Waterwheel Pit – Old Gang Dressing Floor (photo by Dave)

A quick chat revealed that nobody had urgent business after the trip as those who had travelled up from Wales and Chester were camping overnight at Keld. Just going to Sir Francis would only take a couple of hours so everyone opted for an extended trip up Gunnerside Gill to take in a few more levels, whilst Wayne decided to stay at Sir Francis to rig the electron ladder for access and take some photos.

Compressed Air Receiver – Sir Francis Level Entrance (photo by Wayne)
The remainder of the group then walked an extra mile up the eastern side of the gill, passing the spoil tips from Dolly and Barbara Levels before reaching our first goal of Bunton (or Bunting) Level which was started around 1802 and worked until 1898. It was also used to transport ore through to the Old Gang Smelt Mill in the next valley.

The group who changed in the village entered immediately whilst the remained got changed. The newcomers scurried off to the furthest accessible reaches of Bunton on both the Old Rake and Fryerfold Veins, whilst Bunton veteran RJV climbed the rise at the first corner that had previously eluded him.

As the group had fragmented along the various passages and rises, I emerged to find that four of our number had also managed to nip across the valley and have a quick splash in Sun Hush Level, my previous memory of this a few year ago was it being flooded to within an inch of the ceiling but they reported back that it was now waist deep and had potential.
When the group was rounded up, it was decided to take a look into Priscilla Level (started in 1821) on the western bank of the stream with its restored entrance and mine tub, after a quick group photo everyone negotiated the barrels at the entrance and set off down the level. We soon reached a dig which dropped back into a flooded passage, this had been a deterrent on a previous visit but as we were all wet-suited up everyone took the plunge into the water and the level was soon filled with whoops of delight.

The water level soon subsided and a fork was reached, straight on continues in the North Vein whilst the right branch goes into the Watersykes vein, this was investigated but ended very soon where spoil from the vein has blocked the level, although a rise with wooden platforms was observed.

We returned to the North Vein and followed this into an area where the left hand side of the level has been undermined, it was possible to drop down here into some narrow muddy workings, but these quickly became blocked as well.
Leaving Priscilla Level we crossed the river back toward Bunton and saw the metal pipe jutting up out of ground which leads to the engine chamber in Sir Francis Level 240ft below, unfortunately we still had a 2 mile walk ahead of us to get down those 240 blocked feet. We returned to Sir Francis Level about 4 hours after we had left to discover Wayne had got so bored of waiting he had gone home with the Morris Dancers (in truth he was still there and had just had a nice kip in the sun)

The group minus RJV (who had decided it was his turn for a nice kip in the sun) descended the electron ladder into Sir Francis Level; there had been warnings of bad air in the level so we came suitably equipped with an oxygen meter. Our worst fears seemed to be realised when the alarm started to go off after just seconds, but bri hache quickly realised he was breathing into the sensor (doh!) and a much healthier 20% quickly returned to the screen as it was moved away from his heavy breathing. 

The recent dry weather had been kind to us and the water was much lower than what can be encountered, hence we fairly rapidly made the 1 mile journey through 13 years of level drive started in 1864, with our constant companion the pipe from the air receiver that still stands at the level mouth.

There was only one brief dunk in deeper water again just before the end where bad roof conditions have caused water to back up behind the blockage, then we reached our target, the engine chamber and 1880s Hathorn Davey pumping and winding engine. The oxygen level was around 17% at this point, not ideal but no-one was reporting any ill effects.

Everyone explored the area at their leisure taking in the cages, winding drum, pumps, headgear and flooded shaft down to the Tiplady drift at 72ft and further drift at a depth of 129ft. 

The engine itself had a very short working life being installed in 1880, switched off in 1882 and the AD Company liquidated in 1884. 

It was briefly resurrected when the Old Gang Mining Company was formed in 1889 but a valve failure in 1891 ended all work below Sir Francis Level.
Pumps – Sir Francis Level Engine Chamber (photo by Wayne)

Winding Drum and Gears – Sir Francis Level Engine Chamber (photo by Wayne)
When everyone was finished taking in the scenery we had a quick dash back through the water and after safely negotiating the electron ladder we emerged into the pleasant evening sun and raced back down to Gunnerside for a well deserved pint in the Kings Head.

trip leader attempting to pilot a mini-sub back to the pub (photo by Dave)