

Achille Ratti Climbing Club

Parys Mountain mine, Anglesey 6th May 2017

Acid Trip

Eight keen Ratti members assembled on Parys Mountain, Anglesey to explore the copper mines. There was Greg and Gary Jones, Steve Batty, Christine Kirk, Tash, Bernie and Peter Jordan and John McGonagle who organised the day. We were the guests of Parys Underground Group (PUG) Their membership form gave us a good introduction to the trip. 'Your route is not dangerous but this is not a show mine. It is very much in the state it was 100-150 years ago... there are unprotected drops and deep pools of acidic water'. The only way was to sign up and trust the experts.

We met our guides, Ollie and Roy then drove across a waste land of shattered rock. The information boards show that the copper underground was formed by volcanic activity but human force had created this eruption of barren rock. The lurid colours and deep holes of the surface mining were an exciting clue to what lay beneath.

Kitted up with helmets, lamps and 'cows tails', we entered a metal cabin. The front door clanged shut and was locked behind us. The back door led straight down the mine. The smell of sulphur oozed up from below like a bad omen. We were reassured that the air was good to breath until our guide started coughing.

The first steep descent was on a sturdy wooden ladder, made over 100 years ago. Victorian workmanship impressed us. Further down the passageway we saw the disintegrated remains of a modern aluminium ladder. It had corroded within 3 years in the acidic conditions of this mine. Down here, metal rots away and wood is preserved. This thought reassured us as we were being led along passageways that were shored up by chunks of rough-hewn timber straining under the weight of tons of rubble.

The chemical cocktail of the mine was there to see all around. Our headlamps lit up bright coloured drops hanging from metallic straws. A crystal chamber sparkled blue-green, iron stalactites ribbed the sides of passages and delicate shiny threads etched the rock walls. Ollie proudly showed us the 'snotticles'. These drops of pearly white slime with the consistency of mucus that hang from the roof. They are formed from primitive single celled microbes similar to the bacteria formed on rocks near hydrothermal vents. Not pretty but very interesting! Further down the passageway the snottites had a mineralised outer coat and some contained bubbles. Two of these were joined together and hanging down in the charmingly named 'Hanging Bollocks Passageway'

As we went deeper into the mine, we began to notice that there were first aid packs placed in every chamber. Ollie explained that the packs contained eye wash since the most common problem is that people get drops of water in their eyes. After that we were a bit more careful when we were looking up at the formations with their coloured drops. We came to a chamber of pools of clear reddish water. We skirted around these very carefully when we were told that some pools have a pH as low as 2. Our guides told us about the epic of a photographer who was walking backwards as he filmed the mine and ended up in the water. He lost his wellies and thousands of pounds worth of camera equipment.

Contaminated water from this mine is a huge problem. An underground dam constructed of dissolving concrete was investigated by our guides and other members of Parys Underground Group. The authorities were reluctant to take responsibility until the danger to the residents of Amlwch was demonstrated in a mine dam disaster in Scotland. A controlled release of 250,000 square meters of

heavily contaminated water into the Irish Sea was carried out and now the contaminated water flows unhindered by the dam. We were able to walk down formally flooded passageways but I didn't like to think that we were so close to the source of the biggest polluter of the Irish Sea.

Ollie led us along mud bottomed passages where we perfected the crouching stumble. I lost track of the direction of travel and the disorientation was made worse by the fact we were sometimes travelling back on ourselves at a different level. It was like being in a 3D maze.

Parys Underground Group have preserved and recorded many of the historic and archaeological features. One chamber was the site of an archaeological study into Bronze Age mining. We saw several round boulders that had been brought to the mine to be used as 'hammer stones' over 3,500 years ago. Ancient charcoal deposits were evidence that fires had been lit to shatter the rock and make it easier to mine.

Our guides showed us the clog prints of Victorian miners and the remains of tallow candles, an old sail cloth and the discarded metal pipes that were thought to be used for early pneumatic drilling. They told us about the dangers of blasting with black powder and the exploitation of the miners who were paid in 'coppers' and had to buy and maintain all their equipment. It was hard to imagine the harshness of life for those who worked these mines.

After nearly 5 hours underground we were glad to see daylight. We admired the dedication of Roy, Ollie and other members of PUG. They have built up an extensive knowledge of the history, geology, and techniques of extraction in this unique place. They maintain access through the mine and they link with scientists and historians to extend their knowledge. We were grateful to Roy and Ollie for sharing their enthusiasm with us.

There are photographs and a lot more information on the website:

<http://www.parysmountain.co.uk/>