

NAMHO – FOREST OF DEAN 2018

The NAMHO conference was held in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. It was hosted jointly by the Gloucester Speleological Society, Royal Forest of Dean Caving Club, Hades Caving Club and South Gloucestershire Mines Research Group. There were a great variety of trips along with talks and a “fiddle” on Saturday night which was also attended by BCA people who came for their AGM. This report only covers the trips that the Nigel went on. The conference was also attended by Warrington Pete and Sally from the Club. Les Williams was also there for the Saturday night.

Friday

Most people travel to the conference on the Friday evening but there are usually trips laid on during the afternoon. I went to the Great Doward where there are several iron mines in a small group with evidence of fire-setting in them. The area was investigated by archaeologists last year joined by Pete and James. We went into seven small mines, three of which are connected and one a through trip. There was a good turnout for the trip which was led by a caver/miner from the Forest.



One of the mines at Great Doward



A typical bit of fire-setting.

After the trip, I made my way to Clearwell where delegates could camp with larger tents and motorhomes then cycled to Parkend. (Parkend is about 100m lower than Clearwell and it is downhill nearly all the way – so it is uphill nearly all the way back.) There were some introductory talks and then a bit of drinking and renewing friendships.

Saturday

I had pre-booked two trips for the day, an iron mine in the morning and a coal mine in the afternoon.

The morning trip was to Noxon Park, an area of iron mines dropping down dip to an adit known as the Oakwood Mill Level. We had planned to do a through trip in the first mine but high water levels prevented this. Therefore we (that is myself, Roy Fellows and the leader James – no one else turned up) had an enjoyable scramble down to the flooded level in Jetty Mine and back out the same way. The second mine we went into is called High Rift and here we went down dip to the flooded level again than crossed sideways into another section of mining and emerged from another entrance. All in all, the mines are short but interesting and the area would repay a visit some time. We were out in good time as all trips were planned for about 3 hours and we had spent less than that in the two mines.



The entrance to Jetty Mine



Water at the bottom.



Climbing down to High Rift Mine



The rock bridge in High Rift Mine

The afternoon plan was a visit to Hopewell Colliery, a working coal mine that also has a tourist route. Sadly, the organisation had gone pear-shaped and the mine was not expecting us but three of us decided to stay and book on to a tourist trip at 3pm. We then spent the first hour chatting to one of the proprietors. Our trip was with other tourists but Rich Daniels still made it interesting to us as well as keeping the attention of the visitors. The route is down an incline (in Forest jargon, a “dipple”) to the working level from where we walked out along a beautifully walled drainage adit past a few relics and a ventilation furnace. The route back over the surface was along a tramway with stone block sleepers. Despite the cock-up, it still made for an interesting afternoon.



Hopewell coal processing plant



Rich displaying a drill in the level



The furnace in the adit



The last section of the adit

That evening, the main social event of the weekend was a “fiddle” in Clearwell Caves (iron mine). The main dish was a spit-roasted boar and local beer was provided, all in the Barbecue Churn. By the way, a “churn” is a large chamber in the iron mines and a “fiddle” is a drinking/eating/musical evening. A number of delegates took the opportunity for a snoop around the rest of the mine during the evening!



Roast boar



In Barbecue Churn



Christmas decorations (the figure on the left)



The folk singer in Barbecue Churn

Sunday

On Sunday, I had arranged a trip to a stone mine at Blakeney near Lydney just in case I wasn't up to anything more severe. In the event, the night before must have been milder than I expected and it was just a good trip round a small mine worked for the sandstone. The mine is on quite a dip but there were two levels and an incline to explore. Some relics remained such as chains and rails as well as a stone slabbed floor in one place. Good little trip.



Just inside the entrance



A small well to collect water



Timber post and chain used to move the blocks onto carts



Some of the supports are a bit dubious



Stone slabs on the floor



A block awaiting removal from the incline

For the afternoon, I went over to Westbury Brook Iron Mine in the north east corner of the Forest. With me, were Pete, Sally, Lyndon and another delegate plus the leader. In fact we had two leaders to start with as one was showing the way to the other! Here, the dip is steeply down to the west so a lot of the

trip involved climbing up very muddy slopes and in old near-vertical workings. We descended through new pipes installed to keep the mine open (there are alleged to be bats in it) and dropped into the upper level of workings down a series of very slippery climbs. Once on a sort of level, we worked northwards and climbed up to the first “proper” level where the remains of a tramway could be seen. This was followed for a while but with only three hours for the trip, we turned back before going too far and started out. (It turned out that we had gone further than the group the previous day doing the six hour “hard” trip!) Despite the slippery climbs, we were all out safely into sunshine after a thoroughly enjoyable trip.



Typical Westbury Brook chamber



Phreatic evidence on the roof



Climbing up to the First Level



Westbury Brook mud

Monday

For my last day, I went to two coal mines. The Forest of Dean has unusual mining laws in that although some mines used to be run by the NCB, small mines can be run by Free Miners. They are people who have been born in the Forest and have worked in a mine for a year and a day. There are still a few free miners around and on this trip we met two of them at Wallsend Colliery. However, the first trip was down Morses Level. This level works coal in seams which are flooded for part of the year so the visit kept to the highest level. The workings are very low, a common feature of the small FoD mines and dip down towards the centre of the Forest. When we reached the water, we were able to continue in a dry level above it for a distance. After Morses Level, we walked through the woods to Wallsend Colliery, a mine which was on an altogether much larger scale. The current workings are limited to the drift down into the mine and a level which is believed to lead to some decent reserves of coal which were identified in the early 20th century but never exploited. The level is being driven through fallen ground and is very

small, even by FoD standards. At the end, we turned back and headed to surface where we chatted with the miners for a while and watched their improvised screening plant in operation. I even bought a couple of souvenir bags of coal to take home.



Morses Level. Cabin to left and compressor house to right



The coal seam



Relics found in the level



Top of the final incline. Note reused electricity pole



Wallsend Drift



Bottom of the drift



The new level



Forest of Dean coal

Conclusion

There were some organisational hitches but that apart, the Forest offers an excellent all round venue with a variety of mines (and of course caves) with the addition of the Clearwell Caves as an evening venue. Camping was a bit broken up as some people camped near the lecture venue at Parkend and some at Clearwell. Anyone who has not been to a NAMHO conference (and that is quite a high proportion of the Club membership) should try to get to one. Next year, the conference is in Mid-Wales based around Cwmystwyth and other mines in that area and in 2020 it is likely to be in Cornwall.

Nigel Dibben

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