

UNDERWATER POTHOLER

Having established a big circuit around the mine network, I felt duty bound to survey it accurately underwater. Since we already had a plan of the workings, a simple stick map of the line layout would suffice; this is just a matter of noting the distances between changes of direction of the line (which usually occur where the line is tied off to something) and the depth and bearing of the line at these points. But in our enthusiasm for completing the loop, we'd committed the cardinal sin of using an unmarked guideline in some places. Whereas most of the guideline had tags at 5-metre increments, used to estimate distance, a large section of it in the deeper part of the mine was just an unmarked length of parachute cord marking the route. So in order to map it accurately, we made several dives to replace our original exploration line with something more substantial and better labelled.

This task kept me out of mischief for the best part of a year, until I received a phone call from Walsall Council asking me to attend their offices for a meeting with the Police and Military on 11 June 2003. Dressed in jackets and ties, Clive Westlake and I turned up at the headquarters of Walsall Borough Council Engineering Division, to be met by a couple of their engineers, two uniformed police officers and a major from the bomb disposal squad. It turned out that the police had received information that quantities of World War II ammunition had been stored in the mines and had been removed over a number of years by some of the locals. An EOD team had been called in to search the site by foot and dinghy. But they had found nothing, and they found further progress into the mine impossible, as it was underwater.

Despite our initial concerns, the meeting turned out to be very cordial, as Clive and I had come well-prepared with our maps of the workings showing the areas we'd explored. We were also able to show them extracts from a book on World War II underground facilities that mentioned the history of Linley Caverns. This confirmed that despite a local myth having grown up that the workings had been – and might still be – full of munitions, the store had never actually become operational, owing to the instability of the rock and the need to pump water out. As a result, the meeting agreed that there had never been any ammunition stored underground and that there was no record of abandoned unexploded bombs in the area. Notwithstanding this, the major showed us some Home Guard-type improvised devices that we should be on the lookout for, and advised us to report anything suspicious to the police. It turned out that the authorities had been well aware of our activities all the time, via the internet.

Having defused a tricky situation the police and military left, and we settled down for a chat with the engineers to discuss proposed remedial works to a collapse on one of the roads leading to site. A hole had appeared in Bosty Lane above part of the mine workings, and the highway had been closed. This was particularly inconvenient, as the road served the industrial estate alongside the mine, and heavy traffic had been rerouted through a residential area. Pilot borings had been made into the workings to investigate, and our information about what was below the affected area was invaluable in confirming their findings. The council intended to pump gravel down boreholes from the surface into the mine in order to create dams across the passages. Cement grouting would then be injected

into the enclosed area so created, in order to stabilise it. Unfortunately the work would effectively seal off the area around the Hole in the Wall connecting to Daw End Bridge Mine and Phoenix Pit that we had explored over the past 18 months, although other parts of the workings would not be adversely affected.

With the news that we would lose access to a significant part of the mine complex, it was important for us to finish charting this area. Already the visibility was being destroyed by a fine rain of cement dust that had started entering the mine. Even after the water cleared, the floor of the mine in the vicinity of the boreholes was turned into a moonscape of white particulate, which buried our diving lines. The East Anglian Cement Company workings remained clear, however, and I made good use of another one of my homemade rebreathers to complete the mapping project. For this I used my side-mounted rebreather, dubbed the D5 or Doctor Duncan's Dodgy Diving Device. It's debatable whether my time and money would have been better spent getting the appropriate training and qualifications to buy a commercially available rebreather, but sometimes the journey is more important than the destination.

Access to the mine became problematic once more in 2006, when the owner of the woodland containing the mine entrances passed away; the area was inherited by his daughters, who became increasingly belligerent towards anyone using the woods for recreational purposes. This is a pity, because the area is a rare resource in an otherwise urban environment. Despite our attempts to negotiate access, the new owners remained intransigent, and the woodland was eventually put up for sale. From a legal point of view, the landowners have obligations under the Mines and Quarries act 1954 to secure abandoned and disused mines and quarries. Consequently, a security fence was erected around the perimeter in 2013 in an effort to keep people out. For me, the new situation was a moot point, since I had moved away from the area at the end of 2006, but it's a shame that this interesting mine is no longer open to visits by cave divers. Several other flooded stone mines in the UK may still, with the cooperation of the landowner, be visited by cave divers, and they make excellent training sites. The large circuit which we had spent time exploring was 1.4 kilometres long, and over 3 kilometres of flooded galleries have been entered and surveyed. Plenty more remains to be explored and recorded.