

The Penmorfa Chronicles

February 8th 2004

Solving a Conundrum

(Separation, spooks and solutions...)

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Action plan....

On February 8th 2004 a small team re-entered Penmorfa, our first visit since the previous summer. As a small project I had suggested attempting to establish some sort of contact between the remote lower reaches of the Carpenter Series and the main tramming level. This isolated enigmatic series is best reached by climbing all the way to the top of Rift Three and scurrying through a 20m crosscut to the point where JC and others dug through to it in 2002. A rough measurement had estimated the bottom of the series to be 27m lower than this breakthrough point, surely enough to place it close to tramming level, probably in the region of Rift Two.

It was proposed that I would undertake the circuitous route getting down to the foot of the Carpenter Series for a prearranged time, to shout loudly for ten minutes. As an additional attraction I would pour huge amounts of water from some nearby flooded workings down a choked hollow. This was the drain into which a small overflow of water already trickled. Hopefully my colleagues in the main tramming level would notice either the bawling or the deluge.

Bongo buckets....

Gaz provided me with two small plastic buckets for the mission, I clipped these to my belt and set off with great enthusiasm. Whilst Gaz and Brian lingered around in Rift Two, Steve Lea accompanied me into Rift Three to check I got safely to the top. A bit of climbing would be required where an electron ladder had recently been removed and another ladder fixed across the top of the chasm was somewhat precarious.

The two buckets clattered and scrapped as I squirmed up through the various tunnels. I was soon scaling the awkward ladderless section. On reaching the top I was extremely surprised to hear Gaz's voice. Why had he followed me? Why were we not sticking to the plan? I shouted down to Steve who assured me Gaz wasn't there! I felt confused and disorientated. Was I going mad? Voices again, this time closer, virtually next to me! Apparently Gaz and Brian were high in Rift Two above the wagon area and had managed to home in on my drumming buckets, the noise of which had reverberated throughout the mine. Conversation between us was now easy. They were so very close, somewhere in the narrow and inaccessible rift to my right, probably at the other side of a slope of loose rocks, which lay under a treacherous false floor. The two rifts we had thought to be totally separate were clearly not. It was a major discovery. As they dug I could even see a few stones falling. Making a physical connection looked possible but it would take time and was both dangerous and of limited value so we decided to continue with the original plan.

More voices....

Cautiously stepping across the ladder and crawling quickly along the crosscut, I was soon squeezing through the dig into the Carpenter Series. This confined cleft with its several drops and occasional stemples is full of loose stones underfoot, but being on my own, I didn't need to worry about the mini avalanches as I sped downwards.

I was stopped in my tracks when the noise of falling rocks and drumming buckets was interrupted by a muffled voice emanating from under the debris. Once again we were able to communicate easily. A sea of stones flowed in front of me replacing those Gaz was excavating below. We could only be a few metres apart. This second point of contact was just 10m from the top of the entry pitch into Rift Two. Again a lot of work would be required to establish a usable connection - a project for the future perhaps.

Full flow....

Proceeding with the original plan I was soon climbing down past the fragile remnants of a ladder to reach the flooded section in the bottom of the series. Following on from the latter contact I was confident of establishing communication at this lower level. Lots of shouting however simply succeeded in giving me a headache, and intensive listening only highlighted the sound of my beating heart. My second line of attack was the buckets. They were ideal and a torrent was soon pouring down the soak-away. It disappeared quickly and could be heard flowing for a time to some hidden depths. After a while the water in the flooded section was noticeably lower. But despite additional yelling and even more decanting there were no answering shouts. Eventually I gave up and started my ascent out of the series and the return journey down through Rift Three.

Mission accomplished....

Our endeavours had been most successful. Although my bawling and pouring hadn't been detected, we were now certain that the foot of the Carpenter Series was somewhere in the vicinity of the main tramming level. The fact that we had pinpointed a slightly higher link with the lower section of Rift Two proved that this had to be the case. With some digging a viable 'short cut' connection may well be established here.

In addition we had shown the tops of 'Rift Two' and 'Rift Three' lay very close to each other. This fact added to a new appreciation of the mine layout. A few years ago 'Rifts One' 'Two' and 'Three' were regarded as access points along the main tramming level into totally different fault lines where copper was found and then extracted. Penmorfa aficionados and avid readers of 'The Chronicles' will recall that previous adventures (See Issue No 2 2003) led to a realisation that 'Rifts One' and 'Two' merged at their higher levels with numerous interconnecting faults and crosscuts. The same now seemed likely to be the case with 'Rift Three'.

As we made our way back out along the adit we chatted about our discoveries, unexpected voices and the possible uses of 'bongo buckets' in the future!

Rummaging in the attics

(A tale of drill, pole and dustpan...)

The High Life....

A decision was made to push for new ground in the highest area of Penmorfa in 'the attics'. On the 29th of February as we made our way up through the maze of workings that make up the 'First Rift' it became apparent that there was something to look at in each of the three adjoining attics. Dave Flowers was interested in a small hole that was just out of reach in the roof of the First Attic. Gaz was keen to re-evaluate a constricted damp dig in the second and I was eager to continue my acquaintance with the 'Skylight' in the third. The fourth member of our team was Brian, happy to be chief 'Gofer' and voice of reason.

Means to an end....

The First Attic lies at the top of the magnificent First Stemple Shaft, its wooden beams still intact, an icon of Penmorfa. In contrast the elusive cavity in the narrow rift just along the corridor was tiny and unassuming. With care it was possible to climb the workings for 5m

and reach a precarious bridging position below the hole. But this time Dave was prepared having brought along his drill. A bolt was eventually secured and with the aid of a sling access was made into the unknown area. Unfortunately he was to be disappointed finding only a small blind chamber. There was some infill under a low slab but any further progress looked unlikely.

Stab in the dark....

At one end of the Second Attic lay Gaz's target, a slope of wet debris leading up through a constriction into a damp inclined tunnel surrounded by calcified debris and gritty clay. After an initial poke around it became apparent that the top section looked the most promising but working directly below it was rather too dangerous. Luckily there was a scaffolding pole available and this was put to use, although the confined nature of the situation limited the poles usefulness to hopeful jabs. There was also a tendency to get grit in your eyes, and, if you didn't look up, the blows were inaccurate or more debris than anticipated would suddenly cascade and hit you as it past. In addition the material would fail to drop through the lower constriction, despite efforts by those below. It was necessary to clamber back down periodically to stand on the rubble and push it through to lessen the feeling of entombment. Despite the problems some progress was made and perhaps more could be.

Sitting comfortably....

The 5m high 'Skylight' shaft had been discovered in December 2000 at the top of a dry spoil tip in the Third Attic, together with a connection beyond down the rubble into the First Attic. Awkward bridging soon found me directly under its ominously hanging roof of consolidated clay and rocks. Reassuringly nothing had changed since my previous visit over a year ago, when I had steadily removed clinging stones and gritty clay from one wall to reveal solid rock and create a platform on which to sit. Above a slight overhang offered some protection from any rockfall and after passing a length of rope through a small hole in the rock nearby to anchor myself I felt additionally secure on my perch. It was a situation I was familiar with, one which I had burnt into my consciousness, a place I had often visited, drifting there in idle moments, in dreams and in numerous conversations. It enthralled me. Being surrounded by material that had obviously been dropped in from above, perhaps from another mine was fascinating, new passages and workings beckoning just out of reach, perhaps even offering a route up to the Orme's surface.

A tidy house....

Last time I was here I encountered a slight problem. Material extracted from the compacted rubble with hands and tent peg, falling to the base of the shaft and threatening to block the connection to the First Attic. This time I was prepared, with a dustpan! All the grit and small stones could be scooped up and jettisoned precisely to fall into the Third Attic where there was more space. Larger stones were trundled in a similar direction following a warning shout to the others.

With my new method I made rapid progress, dustpan and tent peg in unison. Excavations leftwards lengthened the ledge and revealed much more of the rockwall. There was certainly an area to the side of the shaft to be explored. Eventually I had created a metre high slot able to accommodate my torso and extending back as far as my rope would allow. Wary of becoming complacent about the situation I stopped to assess the possibilities. I decided to leave a section of the tightly packed rubble as a precautionary pillar and abandon the rope so as to reach further in.

Making your own space is very special, it's sculpting from the inside. Rather like the snow-caves I had lovingly crafted and slept in on the Cairngorms, here was a home. Behind my pillar the house grew as the removals continued but still no sign of any far wall or solid roof. I was somewhat surprised by but highly delighted with the stability of my creation.

All too soon I hear shouting, something about beer and it's time to depart. One last run through with the dustpan sweeps the floor so that when I return even the slightest rockfall will be noticeable. After a final contented look around I climb back down to rejoin the others.