

Hodge Close Caves, July 2009

Matt & Steve go cave diving in the UK

In preparation for our first weekend of proper offshore mix diving, we decided we needed some more in-water time to freshen-up the ascent and gas switching skills after Tech 1 in May. Bored of Capernwray and the Delph, we had a last minute change of plan and had a return trip to Hodge Close. This time we would have the opportunity (and qualifications) to explore the flooded mine workings.

We drove up to Coniston in the morning, arriving around 10:30am. The problems started when we realised the usual route for a car down to the entrance tunnel had been closed and 'NO VEHICULAR TRAFFIC' signs posted on the gates. With no one around to ask and to avoid any potential trespass or upsetting of the landowner, we thought best not to ignore them. After a few minutes of checking-out the options we found a steep, but just about feasible footpath down the slate spoil heap from the top car park.

The second problem was the position of the twinning bands on our recently serviced twinsets. Nearly half an inch out, we resorted to some hammering with a lump of slate (of which there was plenty available) to get the back plate to fit. Note to self, check this at home when you get your set back from service or better still, at the shop.

Having assembled the sets, we managed to carry them down the slope and dumped them at the tunnel entrance. We returned, suited up and carried down the deco stages, fins and a short length of rope. We then made two trips through the tunnel (~300ft long, 5-6ft high, partially flooded) with all the kit. The 15ft high scaffold ladder at the end was even more rickety than our last visit, with one side now completely rusted through. Taking no chances, as I believe someone has died falling from here, we tied a rope around the valves and belayed each other down the ladder.

After a couple of hours of effort, we had made it to the water's edge. Kitted up and buddy-checked we swam over to the shot line and dropped through the 12deg water at the surface into 7deg at 24m. Dark, but visibility appeared excellent, over 10m. Since the stages were only for ascent practice and are outside the limits of our Cave 1 qualifications, we dropped them on the line at the entrance.

Switching to back gas and checking pressures, Matt lead into the tunnel and swam for around 100ft to the first chamber. This space is quite large, with the line crossing along the right hand wall. Passing an ominous skull and cross bones sign, we proceeded down the main tunnel reaching a T in the line at about 350ft penetration. We cooked the exit and took the straight-on / slightly right hand line, entering chamber 3 after a further 100ft. The line ends at a large rock in the centre of the room. Someone has left a rampant rabbit on the rock, I can only assume out of reach of the wife!

Matt tied in the reel so we could have a look around, but it turned out to be unnecessary as the whole of the chamber (maybe 15m across and 8m high) and two aborted headings / alcoves were all visible whilst referencing the main line. We had reached the back. At 19min and 40bar used, we thumbed the dive and made our way back out, satisfied by the undisturbed vis. of our entry. Although sometimes awkwardly crossing the passage, the lines throughout are in good condition and continuous all the way to the shot. There is little in the way of silt and there are numerous EXIT and OUT signs on the walls.

Upon reaching the open water, I was struck by the amazing visibility, enhanced by the night vision gained in the cave. Eerily, in a kind of twilight, we could see almost the entire quarry, with vis. around 20m. We collected the stages, moved up to 21m and switched. A 3m/min ascent up to 6m followed by a few minutes to surface through the distinct thermo-cline seemed appropriate.

We surfaced to meet a group of rock climbers and had a bit of 'cave diving, isn't that dangerous?' banter - from a man about to climb a loose, overhanging slate face belayed to some rusty old bolts, above jagged rocks below, in a pair of slippers. Been there, worn the Stone Monkey vest, I'm now far happier in the water.

The trek out was a nightmare, two trips down the tunnel followed by an exhausting double climb up the spoil heap to the car park.

It was a nice little dive, but requiring a lot of effort. Next time I would definitely leave the practice stages in the car for another day, limiting the walk to a single trek through the tunnel. And I'd bring a head-torch.
