

BCRA Field Meeting – North Pennines. 28th to 30th June 2019

Hypogenic Caves of the North Pennines UNESCO Global Geopark: A joint meeting of British Cave Research Association (BCRA) and The North Pennines UNESCO Global Geopark (NPUGG).

A personal account by Vince Simmonds.



Hudgill Burn Cavern, a hypogenic maze cave.

Friday: Loaded the van and set-off from Mendip on the journey north at 11:15. A brief stop in Bristol for some sundry items, then onto the joy that is the British motorway system. All seemed to be going well until approaching Birmingham then it got slower and busier, roadworks on the M5 bridge decks. Eventually, got onto the M6 but there wasn't really much improvement as I entered 17 miles of roadworks. With the usual Friday traffic, I was resigned to a long, tedious journey. The number of vehicles on the road was astounding. When I got to Penrith there was another hold-up getting off the M6 onto the A66. Finally, reached the road to Alston and things were much improved. A fuel-stop in Alston and a bite to eat and continued to Hags Barn Bunkhouse where most participants were staying for the weekend. Sorted myself out and put the tent up and went to say hello to the others at the bunkhouse. The trip, 294 miles.

After spending so long in the van decided to stretch the legs and went for a stroll up the hill, Hags Bank. Plenty of wildflowers alongside the track, especially orchids and wild pansies. Out onto the upland, the evocative call of the curlew, oystercatchers and lapwings too. Some big landscapes, wild moors and the evidence of past mining activities.

A good place to end the day. Back down the hill and got my head down for the night.



Wild pansies.

Saturday: A good night's sleep, led in the tent for a while listening to bird song and the sound of the river nearby. Time for a shower, then coffee. Didn't factor in the midges, very annoying, so sat in the van. Picked up my copy of the latest UBSS Proceedings and read while sipping freshly brewed coffee.

A fine breakfast prepared by our hosts and the chance to meet up with many of the weekends other participants before setting off for Nenthead.

At the village hall in Nenthead the morning was spent listening to a variety of presentations:

- Welcome from BCRA and an introduction UNESCO Global Geoparks, John Gunn
- Introduction to the North Pennines UNESCO Global Geopark, Naomi Foster
- Hudgill Burn Mine Cave, Tony Harrison
- The Mines of the North Pennines and their relationship to hypogenic caves, Peter Jackson
- The caves of the North Pennines, John Dale (Moldywarps)

There were a variety of field trips on offer for the afternoon, both above and below ground; including trips into Knock Fell Caverns, Hudgill Burn Mine Caverns and a Geo-walk. I opted for a geo-walk with Naomi Foster. I haven't been to this area before and thought this would be a good introduction. Packed lunches had been made by the village hall people.

From Nenthead, we went over the hill and down into the valley to Garrigill where we parked in the village. We followed one side of the river valley to Ashgill Force. Quite a nice waterfall with good exposure of the inter-bedded limestone, shale and sandstone. A mine entrance too. Along the way we had passed plenty of evidence of mining, mostly for lead; covered shafts, gated adits, spoil heaps, culverts, etc. some interesting discussions with Naomi and some of the mining enthusiasts that were in the group and who had obviously visited the area on a number of occasions. The return to Garrigill was along the opposite side of the river, useful as it gave a different perspective of the valley. From Garrigill we returned to Nenthead.



Drystone wall



Peering into a mine adit.



Ashgill Force

I decided to have a look at Dowgang Hush and parked in the Nenthead Mines car park and crossed the stream. There were a couple of gated (not locked) mine adits, Capelcleugh Low/Horse Level. I entered the higher of the two and followed the adit for a short distance until

the water got too deep. Some fine stonework and several artefacts; an old bottle, chisel and remnants of an old iron track.



Capelcleugh Low Level

Afterwards I walked up the hush but not too far and returned to the van. I drove up the road and crossed the border into County Durham. Unfortunately, Killhope Mining Museum was closed so I drove back to Alston. Yesterday on the way through I had seen a sign for Epiacum Roman Fort, so I went in search of it, crossing the border into Northumberland in the process. Not difficult to find just a few miles up the road. The car park was a building site but adequate, paid my £2 in the donation box, picked up a couple of leaflets and walked up the field to the fort. Epiacum had been built ca. AD 120, overlooking the Maiden Way, between Kirby Thore, east of Penrith and Carvoran near Greenhead, it was probably a supply route for Hadrian's Wall. The fort was constructed to control lead and silver mining in the area. The fort is very well preserved, especially the seven rows of ramparts on the fort's western side, the remains of the headquarters building, and other features are, also easily seen. A really good view of the site and surrounding area is gained from standing at the south-west tower. The leaflets, including a plan proved to be informative too.

Back to Nenthead where an evening meal at the Miners Arms had been booked. A pleasant evening.

Sunday: Awoke to bird song again. It sounded breezy and there had been a couple of rain showers. Time to pack the kit. The tent was a bit wet but packed it anyway probably won't have time later and I can dry it back home. Showered, and made coffee, some time to read as well. Then breakfast, very good it was too.



Epiacum, western ramparts.

Today's presentations at Nenthead included:

- How to recognise hypogenic caves, Andy Farrant
- Fairy Holes – history and new developments, Adele Ward
- Literature and the underworld of the North Pennines, Frank Pearson
- Cutthroat Caverns. The latest discovery of a maze cave, Chris Scaife and Ben Coult

This afternoon's field trips included trips to Fairy Holes Cave and Hudgill Burn Mine Cavern and a literary walk with Frank Pearson.

Picked up a packed lunch and headed off for today's activity in Hudgill Burn Mine Cave, led by one of the main surveyors of the system, Tony Harrison. Access to the natural cave passages is gained through a lead mine adit, driven during the early to mid-19th century. There is plenty of evidence that early miners and others had visited some of the natural cave passages, about 400m explored has been estimated by Tony H. There are a lot of inscriptions and some possible witch protection marks. The cave is a 'maze' of interconnected/intersecting passages displaying many of the features recognisable as hypogenic in origin. Very dry and not much of a draught for a system that has a surveyed length of 13.5km. mostly comfortable caving; walking, stooping and sandy crawls, some low stuff but we didn't negotiate anything of difficulty. An interesting trip and it was good to get some first-hand experience of a known hypogenic cave system. The trip was about 3 hours.

Then the journey home, it started okay but soon deteriorated as traffic congestion was encountered at Lancaster, Stafford and Birmingham. 6¼-hours, 290 miles, the total trip

distance = 615 miles. Unloaded the van, hung-up oversuit and tent to dry, chilled for a while then bed, an early start in the morning.



Hudgill Burn Mine Cavern



19th century inscription in Hudgill Burn Mine Cavern.



A group discussion in Hudgill Mine Cavern.