HUMBLE BEGINNINGS
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Diving into the INDUSTRIAL UNDERGROU

Yana Stashkevich explains her love for exploring inside some of Great Britain's flooded mines, and urges adventurous souls to follow in her footsteps and discover this hidden side of the country's diving possibilities

Photographs as credited

Not taking my eyes off the thin braided nylon line tied to rusty metal hooks protruding from the wall, I carefully follow the old deteriorating rail tracks and glide through the narrow passage. Cold, dark, uninviting, silent - well, if you are diving a closed circuit rebreather - but incredibly intriguing. I avoid any sudden movements in fear of causing a complete silt out and disturbing the otherwise impeccable visibility.

It is almost an hour into the dive, and we should be approaching a chamber where we will make a connection to the lower level. I adjust my main light to full beam. Absorbed by dark slate walls, it only reaches a few metres ahead, but I can see the rail track suddenly drops down and into the dark abyss. The floor disappears. Fully aware that I am now mid-water, I continue following the white line stretched like a tiny spider web across the big void.

Predictably, my dive buddy switches on his 60,000 lumen video lights behind me, revealing the vastness of the space that momentarily overwhelms me. Some 45m below, gigantic slate slabs are evidence of a not-so-recent collapse. A tiny dark dot of the entrance to the upper-level passage is marked by a chain ladder with highly questionable health and safety credentials. We start to descend after negotiating a three-dimensional maze following the line across the lower level. Hovering over the passage floor again rather than the deep vastness, I felt a sense of relief. I've never been a big fan of heights, but it was the first time I experienced a brief moment of vertigo underwater, nearly half a mile away from the entrance underground.

Finally, this is it. The old broken rail bridge stretches halfway across another chamber. Rust-coloured wispy bacteria formations covering the fragile structure are easily disturbed by even the slightest movement of water. I hover and watch them slowly flutter in front of me. Surrounded by these floating glittering formations, I feel as if I am transported to a scene from The Matrix.

The surreal dreamlike moments keep drawing me back to dive in the mines time after time, inspiring me to retrace my steps and revisit the ever-changing, yet-static underground sites. There are many mines in the UK, a few of my favourites are:

Did you know?

Mine diving can be traced back to the early days of mining when miners would use diving equipment to work in underwater tunnels and shafts. In the 19th century, diving equipment became more advanced, and miners began using diving bells and air pumps to explore deeper underwater tunnels.

> "Flooded mines are industrial time capsules that once were the core of the thriving UK economy, providing livelihoods for thousands of people and communities. Building sites locked in time and preserved underwater, just waiting to be rediscovered"
>
> *Ian France (mine and cave diver)*

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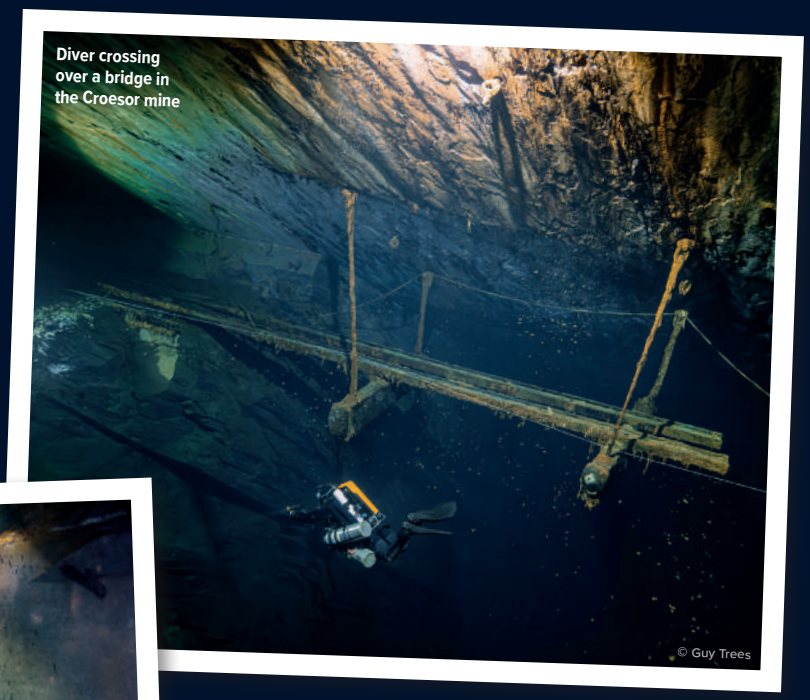
> “Mines are not only an all-year-round diving location. Mine diving is about rediscovery, going back in time. It is re-touching human history. It is about a sense of privilege of being somewhere where not many have ventured before”


Diver crossing over a bridge in the Croesor mine
© Guy Trees


Diver exploring deep in the mine
© Ari Linna

Croesor Slate Mine, North Wales

Broken suspended bridges frozen in time. An old mining cart fallen off the track above and now stood upright with a milky cloud of dust surrounding it and slate scattered all around. Another, arguably the most-charming, mining cart stacked with slate slabs and left perfectly undisturbed on the tracks in a small room. Entangled and fused together clumps of chains hanging from the ceiling resemble the floating mountains of Pandora from Avatar, and not what was ultimately a money-making industrial mining site.

This is just a small part of Croesor in North Wales. With its four levels and vast maze of passageways, for me it is the most-interesting and intriguing mine dive in the UK. But it is probably just a tiny fraction of the estimated hundreds and thousands of miles of underground passageways across 140,000 UK mines. Croesor is one of the few mines that has not been sealed, closed to the public or deemed too dangerous. Although the definition of dangerous is relative.

The unmistakable smell of diesel and iridescent pattern of the layer of oil on the surface of both dive base entrances are the obvious hazards. It drips from an old transformer room last used in the early 1930s, and seeps through the groundwater. At least these were not the remains of tons of explosives that were stored in Croesor until the 1970s, after the mining officially stopped. I acknowledged the risks and naturally chose to ignore them. After a short moment of hesitation, and ensuring my mask was on as tight as can be, I jumped into the water.

Aber Las Slate Mine, North Wales

Contaminated water and entanglements are not the only potential hazards in mines. You would think that ‘zero vis’ is sometimes used as a bit of an exaggeration, but on my first dive in Aber Las three years ago, the dark could not get any darker. After climbing the ladder carrying our kit down steep and slippery crumbling slate steps, we made our way towards the head pool. While the torrential rain outside and dripping water from the ceiling added to the enigmatic atmosphere, the running stream carried mud and slate dust straight into the head pool - the only dive base for both the entrance to the shallow and deep route. Black clouds of silt were growing exponentially as we were kitting up. Armed with solid mine diving skills and hopeful that the visibility would eventually clear, we followed the line down the shallow route. Despite all the optimism, we turned the dive at around 50 metres into the mine.

I later returned to Aber Las on multiple occasions fascinated by seemingly benign and unimpressive passageways that slowly reveal hidden rooms and fascinating artefacts – old explosives boxes, wrenches, and mining tools. It was hard not to be slightly amused by the crumbling slate flakes slowly falling from the ceiling as you

swim through the passageways. The Graveyard, an eerie room with large slabs of slate that fell from the ceiling and wedged themselves like daggers into the floor resembling gothic gravestones, is immensely impressive, but is also a reminder of the potential risk of collapse. My favourite features are, of course, the famous Welsh Hell's Gate close to the end of the line, and a cinematic stairway with heavily corroded railings leading down to an abandoned mining cart.

Another slate mine, Cambrian, is just around the corner and a short walk away is connected to Aber Las. Sadly, the connection between the two has collapsed.

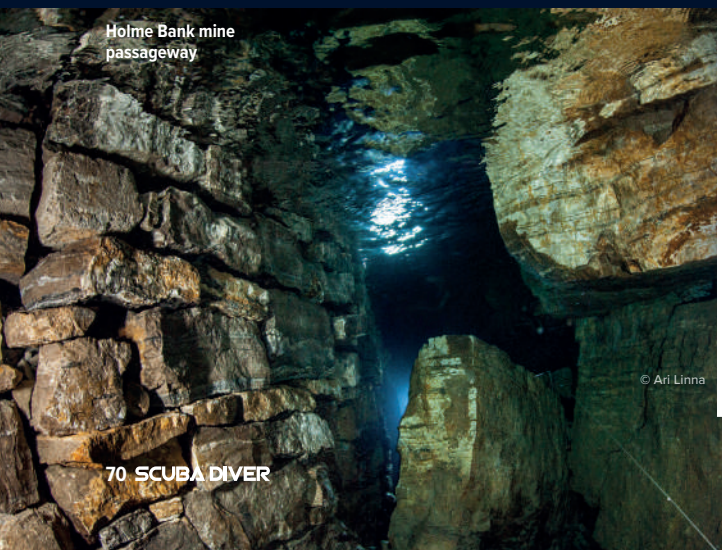
Holme Bank Chert Mine, Derbyshire

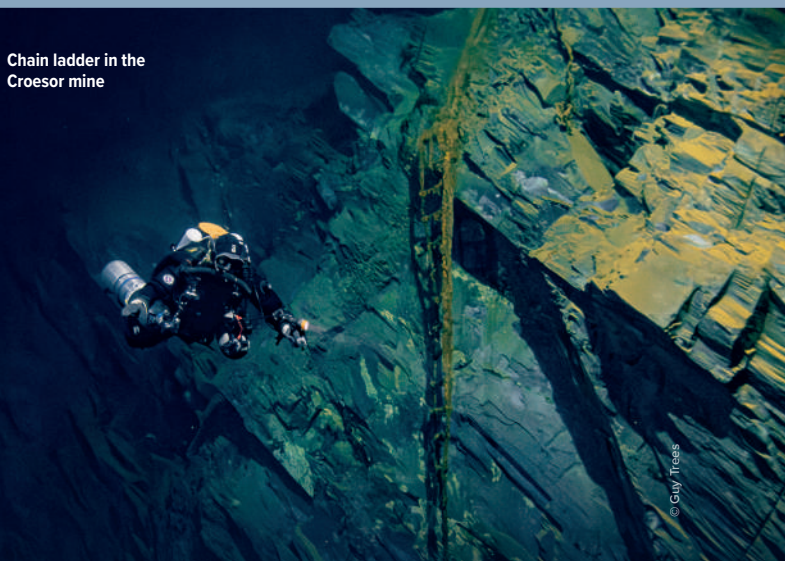
Set on the grounds of a boutique architect firm and metalworks workshop, this mine was my introduction to the underground world. A more-forgiving, brighter and overall 'friendlier' mine. A perfect training location that tests your buoyancy skills in less than 5m of water. With abandoned miner's boots, an impressive pump base, and substantial wooden props and stone pillars supporting the ceiling, Holme Bank is often my go-to for maintaining skills and trying out new dive equipment.

Mines vs caves

I have always wanted to dive in both. But while it's hard to deny the appeal of the mesmerising Mexican cenotes with glittery haloclines and wax-like formations, the thought of tight silty passageways and the need to squeeze from sump to sump in a wetsuit in British caves didn't appeal in the slightest.

Mines are different environments to caves – man-made, somewhat structured, predictable and functional. As opposed to created by nature, random and chaotic. Caves develop over thousands of years, remaining constantly ever-changing, living, evolving habitats - I still remember my shock of seeing a fish half a mile into a cave in France. Mines resemble life on a downward spiral. Once abandoned, they continue to decay, collapse, and deteriorate more and more. They cannot be revived or re-invented. This is what makes them increasingly appealing. It is the urge to experience them before it is too late, bordering on fear of missing out.


Holme Bank mine passageway
© Ari Linna


Chain ladder in the Croesor mine
© Guy Trees

I've always been fascinated by deep wrecks, initially the overhead environment training was a side step for me to develop the skills for wreck exploration. If I am being completely honest, it was also a much-needed break from dealing with unpredictable British weather, blown-out dives, strong currents and the pressure of a 'virtual ceiling' due to decompression obligations. Find your reason to dive mines.

Final thoughts

While diving in the British underground world is incredibly rewarding, do not underestimate the effort required to get to the mines. Croesor warrants a rugged four-wheel drive vehicle just to get to the mine entrance. Access to the dive base in other mines can also be challenging. Access rights should always be agreed with the landowner. But with the right training, equipment, procedures and techniques, these unique pieces of archaeology will not disappoint. Dive safe, be curious, keep exploring. ■


Mine entrance
© Guy Trees