Why mines are secured against entry and why you should help keep it that way.

Do you explore old mines or are you interested in visiting old mines?
Have you noticed that some sites are locked or secured with a bolt?
There is a very good reason that you should help us to keep these sites secure. Breaking into mines is a sure way of forcing the landowner to seal them up permanently. The DCA is here to help explorers from all backgrounds visit caves and mines, but some sites must be kept gated – not to keep explorers out, but the general public. Access to these sites is easy though, please read on for more details.

Over the last year or two, there has been a noticed increase in the number of entrances to old mines being broken into in the Peak District area. All these sites have ways for explorers to legitimately enter, either with a key, code or adjustable spanner, without breaking and entering (causing criminal damage). There was no need for the gates or locks to be damaged and having a gate that cannot be secured will likely lead to the owner sealing the site up forever and no one getting back down there. The problem with gates being damaged is perhaps linked to a lack of understanding as to why that physical barrier is there and how to go about gaining legitimate access past it. During its existence, the Derbyshire Caving Association has been asked several times to help landowners and some of the large Derbyshire estates make mine sites safe to members of the public, because they are either on CRoW Access Land or close to public rights of way. Never has the DCA been involved with physically securing a site that has not had a system for explorers to access it put in place, nor has DCA installed any locks on sites unless this is a non-negotiable condition of the landowner allowing anyone to visit. Where a lock, code or bolt is present, it is because it must be that way, or the site will be permanently sealed. A landowner has a legal obligation to make old mines safe from public entry. This requirement is something that the DCA works with landowners to achieve without resorting to the permanent sealing of the site. If mine gates or shaft lids are not kept closed and secure, a landowner may seal the site permanently, and this has happened many times in the past. Having a gate on a mine does not mean you cannot go down there, it just means that the gate must remain in place and securable from public entry.

If you are new to caving, mine exploration or have just found this document to read by accident, you might not know about the DCA and its work. DCA is not a governing body, or the cave police, but a collection of cavers and mine explorers who (as volunteers) help landowners and cavers manage cave and mine access, conservation and safety issues. When we are asked to help a landowner install a physical barrier to a mine, it is with explorers in mind that we approach the task. Our intention is always to install the least restrictive access that a landowner is satisfied with. Ultimately, it is their land and they have legal obligations to keep places secure from accidental entry. Our physical securing methods fall into broadly 3 categories:

No locking mechanism, but a barrier to accidental entry of humans or animals.
This might be as simple as a metal sheet or grill over a shaft or adit. All that is needed is to remove the grill and replace as you go in. Most common for sites on farm land that are away from public rights of way. Please replace all lids to prevent animals from falling into shafts.

A "Derbyshire Key" system.
If you have no idea what this is, it is simply what we locally call a large, adjustable spanner. There are dozens of mine shaft lids and adit doors that are opened and closed just with a spanner. Either use the spanner to remove or loosen a nut or, in some cases, use the spanner to be the handle on a square pin, just like a door handle. We use this system in any locations that have a chance of public access or where there are children at risk if the site is not secured with a tool. Please make sure these gates and lids are always tight shut when you leave, and most gates will allow you to secure yourself inside while exploring. DCA has managed in the past to get some sites with padlocks converted to this spanner system and it is becoming more common around the UK. Buy an adjustable spanner for your kit and the world is your oyster. This system only works for landowners if explorers secure the gate again after use.

Combination padlock.
If for some reason a Derbyshire Key is not possible to install, or seen as unacceptable by the landowner, there needs to be a padlock installed. Where this is the case, a combination lock is preferably installed on the mine and the combination is issued to anyone who asks for it via the DCA. If the combination is not held by us, then we have details of who to contact on the DCA website. So long as the combinations do not end up posted publicly all over the internet, they will remain unchanged and freely available to those who ask for them. There are 3 or 4 sites in Derbyshire that have a padlock that requires an actual key to be used, and that is a condition of the landowner due to either the environmentally sensitive nature of the location, or the extreme proximity to the public or their own property.

In all 3 examples above, there is no need to break into a site as a tool or code can be obtained with very little delay. All that is required is for you to check up on what you need to get in before you go to a mine and for you to leave the site secure after you go and report any damage to locks or gates to DCA so they can be fixed.
In recent weeks the following sites have been broken into and I use them as an example of how this was totally unnecessary and puts the site at risk from total loss:

Mandale Mine near Lathkill Dale – A Derbyshire Key system used to be in place here. Explorers were regularly leaving the gate undone and the Reserve staff were concerned as this gate is right next to a footpath. DCA was told it had to use a padlock from then on. The padlock was broken off several times. In order to make it easier to get in the mine, DCA then fitted a combination lock, which was also repeatedly cut off. The combination was freely available to those who asked DCA for it. For one last time, DCA will attempt to install a Derbyshire Key system here, but if this is left unsecure, as often as the other entrance nearby, the Reserve staff will likely concrete the mine shut forever. This site is at real risk of being lost to all, because an individual or a group of explorers could not be bothered to just tighten a nut back up or email DCA for a code. We have reason to believe it is the same individual or group damaging the locks here and anyone who knows who is responsible is encouraged to give them a copy of this document to read.

Holmebank Mine near Bakewell – One of the 2 landowners covering the mine workings was upset about regular break-ins to the entrances on their land and has since closed access to the parts of the mine under their land. This has caused the loss of the only wheelchair accessible mine for young people on outdoor centre trips and the loss of a cave diving training venue. Explorers had easy access to this mine for years with no problems until the locks began getting broken off. The landowner of the other half of the mine is constantly replacing combination locks. The combination has always been available for any explorers with insurance by speaking to the owner at his business premises which is right at the mine entrance. Access could not be more straightforward here and the risk of total loss is very real if the gates do not get left secure.

Devonshire Mine near Matlock Bath – For years there was only access to a single gated adit on this land. An adjustable spanner was all that was required. Following the change in landowner a couple of years ago, DCA volunteers capped an open mine shaft in their garden and were rewarded with permission to open other entrances on the land, so long as they were also made secure against entry by their kids and the general public. Recently, the old top entrance has had its rusty steel blockage cut out and a new gate with combination lock fitted (with a view to making it a Derbyshire Key in the future). Anyone can get this combination by requesting it from the DCA. This gate has been complete for just weeks and has already been vandalised. If this gate is not left locked, it will need to be welded shut or be concreted shut and we will lose all access to any of the current or yet unopened entrances to the mine. Stupid actions with the gates at this site will only cost access to the whole mine. The landowner's house overlooks this site so any entrance left unsecure will be noticed very quickly. DCA volunteers will continue to make these entrances safe again until the landowner has enough and concretes the mine shut.

If you are reading this as someone who either has, or is contemplated breaking into a site, please understand that your doing so has a big impact on all the other explorers who want to go to that mine. In leaving a mine with a lid or door open or breaking in so that it cannot be secured again, these individuals are putting the access to these sites at

risk for everyone. A landowner who grants access to a mine, so long as it is left secure, does so because they choose to. They can just as easily have a place permanently sealed up and then they have no more issues with explorers or liability. The point I am making here is that if you find a barrier between you and the mine you wish to visit, either return with a spanner or contact the DCA Access Team to get the combination code. Breaking in and leaving a site unsecure may well cause the loss of that entrance or entire mine permanently. A bit of pre-planning or reading on the internet will give you all the info you need about how to legitimately access a mine site without committing a criminal offence or jeopardising access and years of hard work by volunteers.
No one here at DCA wants to prevent people from going underground, we are only helping the landowner administer the access system they insist on. It is that or no access at all in some cases. Keep gates secure and we'll keep access to these sites for explorers in the future.

The reasons for the recent increase in damage to gates is hard to pin down. Break-ins have always been a problem, just never this frequently. It may well have something to do with the increased appeal of these old industrial sites to different user groups or the large volume of mine exploring videos appearing on social media. "Urban explorers", for want of a better description, are explorers just like us cavers, but they may not be aware of DCA and why a site needs to be kept secured and how to go about getting in legitimately. If this message can be spread far and wide it might just save another mine being lost to explorers, or another volunteer having to go out and fix a lock or gate. As explorers, we should also consider what is sensible to put out there on the internet for all to see. Ask yourself is the site sensitive, open or at risk of damage? Should you use a mine's name or show a location in your social media? We are all entitled to post pictures and videos of the places we go, but please consider the audience you might attract to a mine or cave and, most importantly, the long-term protection of the site itself.

An open letter by Pete Knight, DCA Projects Officer. The opinions expressed are my own.
30th March 2019

www.theDCA.org.uk