

BIRTHDAY

Discovering the 25th birthday of the Blairgowrie Hillwalking Club was imminent put me in mind of my first encounter with the Club. It was on my own birthday in November 1981. The chance of a lift up long Glen Lyon and a shot at an unclimbed Munro made it an attractive notion, almost like a present. The hill was to be Meall Ghaordie, one of those awkwardly positioned hills with few options for extensions or variety.

The small bus dumped us at a bridge over a river, a large boisterous river. Coming down from a corrie was a foaming burn. There was a lot of water about. November carries little promise of good weather and we left the bus in steady rain. The two spurs of Ghaordie loomed out of the mist. We would take a line between them into the corrie. As we climbed the steady rain became heavy rain. Above the 2000 foot contour conditions changed again. The heavy rain became sleet and we were enveloped in thick mist. 'We' included Ping Smith, Malcolm Hamilton and some others I did not know. There was also a French assistant on a year's teaching in Blairgowrie. She had come on the walk to 'see more of Scotland'. Looking at the bleak and soggy 100-metre radius that was our present horizon I couldn't help thinking she had made a terrible mistake!

I had made a mistake as well. I was wearing my long trusted orange anorak, made of ventile. It had served me well for years and I dismissed the new technology of Gore-tex as a gimmick that might not last! We reached an area of complete snow cover. Looking up ahead we saw what appeared to be substantial bank of snow. So significant did it look that we thought we might have to outflank it rather than tackle it direct. In fact it was a weird deception of the misty conditions. A few strides later we casually stepped over the bank. It was a small line of drift little over a foot high! Someone checked the bearing and before too long we found ourselves on a snowy, wind-blasted ridge. The sleet had turned to snow, now driving along horizontally! Everyone caught up and then it was a head down, hood up march to the summit cairn.

I didn't eat much on the hills in those days, and still don't. All the others gathered in the walled circle around the trig point and started delving into their sacs. Flasks, sandwiches, fruit and other picnic-type goodies appeared. I quickly consumed my kit-kat and water, and waited. At this point I noticed my ventile anorak, sodden by the walk up, had begun to freeze. When I moved my arms, which took more effort than usual there was a curious creaking and cracking sound from the cloth. Any sudden flexing movements caused a shower of ice crystals to be shed. My anorak was solidifying. I was getting colder and colder as it took a while for the feasting to finish. It was a great relief when we started the descent, me rather stiffly!

We had a the same weather conditions in reverse order, only the rain belt on the lower slopes was heavier still! There had been an advantage in the ventile being frozen, for now it was completely saturated, along with my clothes underneath, and my skin below that.

Arriving at the bus my fellow walkers unloaded their kit again and produced fresh clothes for the slow journey home. I had no such foresight, having always relied on surviving discomfort until I got home. On this occasion the misery was fairly acute. I could feel runnels of water making their way down most areas of skin. I was making my own personal pool on the bus floor. The bus was also remarkably draughty and I was pretty demoralised by the time I opened my front door.

I took off my fabled anorak and instead of hanging it up I placed it on the floor. Still rather immovable from its absorbed water it stood up as if still occupied by a body. Hood fully up, chest out, arms poised, gunslinger style, it could have been awaiting an intruder! Clearly its hill days were over. I knew what I wanted for my birthday.

On my next expedition I had a Gore-tex jacket!

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