



"Mountain Thyme"

Blairgowrie and District Hillwalking Club Newsletter, December 2012

*Mountain Thyme is the Newsletter of the Blairgowrie and District Hillwalking Club.
The editor welcomes comments and contributions from all members.*

The Presidents comment.

Having just retired in October 2011, it wasn't in my life plan to take over the busy role of club president but here I am and it is an honour to be back on the committee. I hope to build on Neil's excellent leadership. In October, I stepped up to president, as Peter Henderson is able to come back on the committee as vice president so we will continue in these roles until the AGM in March 2014. Together with the other committee members, (Neil Mcleod, Nina Bell, Evelyn Menzies, Peter Scheuerl, Iain Mitchell, James Tweedie, Irene Rintoul and Rob Robertson) this is a strong team and we are working hard to make sure the club provides a good and varied programme for our members to enjoy hill walking.

Looking back at my notes of my last spell as president (1999-2000) there are many similarities. Back then, we agreed to buy some "livvy bivvies" or emergency shelters. Two of these shelters are still available, I have one in my sack, and Graham Robertson has the other. The third has disappeared – does anyone know where it might be?

Following Eric Drummond's talk on mountain rescue, I feel we should carry these as they can provide shelter. Perhaps we need more as it would be very cosy to get more than 4 in one of these shelters if we wish to use them for protection in bad weather.

Improving skills is another recurring theme and committee members are investigating training for navigation and mountain safety in winter and summer. Acquiring these skills and updating your knowledge is important, as is putting them into practice. Let's make time on some of our walks to practice!

The club has a good programme of walks and social events. We struggle with numbers during the summer months, which makes running a bus a heavy draw on resources. I am keen to offer walks supported by buses whenever possible. This means we need to build up funds and encourage more people to join. So you can all help by supporting the meets and social events and encouraging more folk to join the club.

When I handed over to Dorothy in 2000, we had just started to think about celebrating 25 years of the club. Now we are planning our 35th anniversary, which promises to be full of interesting and fun events. Jane Clark.

Meet Secretary's Report

We are more than half way through the present walks programme and already considering the 2013 - 14 session. We still have five walks to go, including the Christmas and New Year ones, so don't put your boots away quite yet!

This year, due to changes in the Committee, we have a dual system in place for walk registration. The system seems to be working alright with one e-mail address shared by the 'Meet Secretaries' and two separate telephone contacts. Any route chosen to register will see your name put on the sheet for the next walk as the 'Secretaries' do speak to each other!

The walks this year so far have been varied both in location and content. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our club members who submitted walk sheets, some at short notice, and kept us right on the walks. Surprisingly, as last year, the coastal walk on Sunday 18 November, proved to be one of the best attended with 28 taking part.

The system we now have of Rob's report going not just to the 'Blairie' but to James too, to go on to the website, is a great step forward. People browsing our site can now see what we get up to on a walk and your wee faces are now on the World Wide Web!

Our relationship with JP Coaches, the suppliers of our transport, remains strong and friendly. JP Coaches have to be commended on their flexibility and accessibility as they are keen to see that we get the coach we need, even if it means less money for them. We have been lucky with drivers this year as both Bill and Willie have served us well, being very accommodating and courteous.

All in all, despite some very low turn-outs for some of the summer months walks, I think we can say that the programme has gone well and those who have done the walks enjoyed what they did.

Thank you to those of you who have continued to support the club by turning out on a Sunday. Neil McLeod

A Walk to Remember (A Cautionary Tale)



I keep two objects in an orange plastic bag in my study. For the first time in months, maybe years, I am looking at them now. One is a watch. Fine grains of sand are ground into its black leather strap. A section at the top of the glass face has been smashed off, leaving the dial underneath exposed. The hands are stopped at 57 minutes past 1. The date is also frozen, the 28th. The other object is a map, Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 No 41, the Ben Nevis area. A large area of the map is stained a rusty shade of brown. The objects are "souvenirs" of a winter walk with friends from the Hillwalking Club on 28th December 2006. I was delighted to be able to join in this unofficial meet because I was on a one year sabbatical, determined to take advantage, where possible, of the opportunity to fit in extra activities.

In the evening we got together to discuss the following day. Twelve of us chose to walk out from Mamore Lodge to Binnein Beag (943m) to be followed by Binnein Mor (1130m). In the time before the lights went out in the bunk rooms a brief look at my map confirmed a fair walk in before the hills would be reached. We would need to keep up a reasonable pace given the limited daylight at that time of year, with the sun rising about 9am and setting around 3.45pm.

We arrived at Mamore Lodge the following morning with the first light of dawn. My recollection is that we were ready to get going just before 9am. We set off, everyone kitted with the ice axes and crampons required for a winter walk. We made reasonable progress in good weather (no rain or snow, wind speeds low) along a good path for most of the way to Binnein Beag and ascended that Munro without any notable difficulty or the need to deploy our winter walking kit. As we reached the top the cloud base was beginning to lower. I cannot now recall if we had a clear view but it was clear that we couldn't expect one at the top of Binnein Mor. Two members of our group elected not to ascend Binnein Mor, but instead to return on the path to Mamore Lodge.

We started our ascent up the NE ridge of Binnein Mor. We were soon walking through areas of lying snow and at one point I slipped a metre or so on one patch. In retrospect this might have given me pause for thought, as I was walking in fairly well worn Brasher Boots with a much reduced tread, but at the time I just carried on. I wanted to walk up another hill!

We ascended further. Before long visibility was reduced as we entered the clouds. We steadily progressed until we reached a point where two options were open to us. One was to climb up large, slabby, icy rocks on the ridge, involving a degree of scrambling. The other was to traverse a fairly steep slope where the snow was covered by an icy crust. After brief debate, five elected to scramble up the rocky ridge while I was one of five who chose to traverse the slope. I had to confess to having no practical experience of using an ice axe (in hindsight another obvious moment to pause and reflect). So we began to traverse the slope, carefully putting our boots into cut steps while using our ice axes to give an extra hold as we made progress. In the distance, fleeting gaps in the clouds presented a view of snow being blown across and down the slope, with the wind from the south or our left. Progress was at a slow, steady pace.

After what was maybe 20 minutes, the traverse of the slope was becoming more challenging. One member of our party elected to put on their crampons. Others agreed that this was a good idea and began to put on theirs. I attempted to put on my crampons, an old fashioned design with long leather laces, but I was struggling to do so with one hand holding my ice axe to prevent myself from slipping down the slope. At this point, at last, reality dawned that I was at a point where progressing, when others had crampons on and I couldn't fit mine, would be sheer folly. I therefore told the other members of my party that I couldn't put my crampons on and that I intended to retrace my steps back across the slope and return on the path to Mamore Lodge. They were not

happy at the thought of my returning solo but I insisted that it would not be fair on them to have to abort their walk for reasons I was responsible for (my own stupidity not to put too fine a point on it) and I told them to head on.

So I began to retrace my steps, finding the footholds and using my ice axe as an additional anchor when moving back. Given how slippery the slope was, I was aware that I needed to go carefully. However another concern was at the back of my mind - time. In retrospect maybe this shouldn't have been such an issue. I had a torch and provided I was on the path I could retrace my steps. However I was well aware that I only had maybe around two hours of daylight left. Already maybe ten minutes had elapsed since I had turned.

If some facts have a degree of haziness after six years, others are as sharp as yesterday. Possibly trying to go a little quicker given the time, confirmed by my watch as nearly two pm, suddenly, as quickly as you can click your fingers, I was falling. My ice axe was out of my hands in an instant and I was sliding down the icy slope at a frighteningly rapid speed. In those short few moments of time two thoughts went through my mind, one how angry I was with myself for getting into this situation and the other, how could I slow myself down? I recall trying to spread myself as if to mimic the shape of a crampon with my hands and feet.

My forehead banged against a rock. I've never experience a blow like it in terms of sheer shocking, stunning violence. My left arm took a knock and also my backside. But I was slowing down and then came to a halt. All this in a matter of seconds. How far had I fallen? I wasn't sure: Maybe 150 feet, maybe a fair bit more.

Although I felt I'd fallen some distance, visibility was still limited as I remained above the cloud base. I was, to some extent, concussed. But I was alive which a few second before was not a certain outcome. However this was no cause for celebration. As I looked at my map to try and figure out what to do, it started to turn red in front of my eyes, even though it was inside a plastic case. Blood was running down my head. I didn't want to touch my forehead fearing how bad the damage could be.

I can't recall if I had a mobile phone with me. I suspect there was no signal in any event. I had a whistle. I could have blown it but time was short. How seriously was I injured? I wanted to get out before it got dark. An overnight outdoors in the winter wouldn't be good.

Fortunately my legs appeared to be unscathed. I could walk. Which way? Initially and with my mind unfocussed, I headed further down the slope over rough broken ground but no longer ice covered, aiming to get below the clouds to try and figure out where I was. After what seemed like an eternity but could not have been much more than 15 minutes, I emerged under the cloud base. Nothing was recognisable from the walk in.

At a distance of perhaps a mile away a river passed from left to right. Looking at my compass, it appeared to be heading west to east. The map was becoming more difficult to read, but I suspected that the river was the Water of Nevis. If it was and I could cross it, I should find a path on the other side which would lead to the minor road in Glen Nevis.

The blood was still flowing as I headed towards the river. I had no idea if the amount I was losing was a cause for serious concern or not. But the only option was to keep going. Fortunately crossing the river was not as difficult as I had feared and once across I found a path. I was now confident of where I was and I had a route out. My spirits rose.

Stepping out as quickly as I could, I began to half imagine I could see a distant solitary tree by the path. After a while it became clear that in fact I was catching a couple of walkers. An increasing sense of hope spurred me on. I could make it! I had to catch them up.

Fortunately they were not in such a great hurry as I was. I got nearer and nearer until finally I was able to call out and get their attention. They waited. As I approached I realised it was two relatively young men. I half imagined looks of horror would appear on their faces at the sight of me coming towards them. But although they looked concerned, they didn't appear alarmed. Maybe I wasn't a complete mess? I explained that, as they could probably see, I'd had a fall and asked if they could help. While one walked with me, the other pushed on to the car park at the end of the path, at the back of Ben Nevis. Only one car was left in the car park, about to leave with a family returning to Fort William. By this stage it was around 4pm and the last of the light was starting to fade from the sky.

My voice slightly choked, I thanked the two walkers and gladly accepted a lift with the family to Belford Hospital, Fort William. Several stitches were required but an x ray revealed no break in the arm. I managed to get a phone message through to Mamore Lodge to let the rest of the group know that I had had a mishap but was OK. A rescue car came to pick me up. After phoning home, a shower and change of clothes I was belatedly able to join the evening meal, albeit adorned with an outsize head bandage. I was lucky of course. It could easily have been a lot worse. Of the numerous lessons you could take from this tale, I would, at the risk of stating the obvious, mention the following:

Being a reasonably experienced summer hill walker does not mean that you are prepared for winter conditions.

You really do need to have an ice axe and crampons, to know how to use them and to consider where and when to put them on. Sooner may be better. A slope is not the easiest location. Practice plenty of times beforehand and ensure they are reasonably easy to put on. After I was back home, it took me five minutes to put one crampon on in a warm room in front of an open fire. I've now got easier to fit crampons which fit on the winter hill boots I also bought.

Attend a Winter Skills Course. I've attended a couple of club winter skills courses since the fall, but not used my skills in practice, so I would be wary of over-reaching in any winter situation.

Beware over confidence. Sometimes a situation can develop and you need to recognise that going back may be the best option, sooner rather than later.

Apart from the two souvenirs mentioned at the start of this article I acquired another. I visited my GP after my return and discussed the bump to my head and whether I should get my skull checked for any damage. I was puzzled by their questions when I visited PRI. How was I feeling now? Did I feel OK? Was I a bit upset, etc? I said I felt fine and was slightly puzzled by their questions. It transpired that my GP had advised them that I was suffering from "a slight depression." Well yes I am I confessed as I fingered a wee groove I had acquired on the left corner of my forehead!

Richard Townsend

WHAT, WHY and HOW?



WHAT – am I talking about? **The 3Peaks in 3Nights Maggie's Challenge.** Why would that be of interest to a club with many members who have completed all the Munros and some of whom have done the 24hr Three Peak Challenge? Well I think it was of interest as many of you sponsored me.

WHY – did I do it and why did you sponsor me? Those individuals who supported me will have their own reasons, but during the time from enrolling and completing the challenge most people tended to respond 'Oh yes so and so was helped by Maggie's, or my Dad has cancer, etc.' Cancer is something that has touched most of us directly or indirectly by the time we reach our middle years either personally or through friends or family.

Maggie's Centres are a charity that has centres in many of our cities and is expanding continuously with new projects in the pipeline. Our nearest is in Dundee in the grounds of Ninewells Hospital. One unique feature of all the new Maggie's Centres is that they are designed by famous architects, for example the Dundee Centre was designed by Frank Gehry who is a Los Angeles based architect, known widely for his design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The Dundee building has a wonderful vista over the Tay with a unique and peaceful garden. Walking into Maggie's is a unique experience for the majority of people who have experience of the NHS. Unique is the word; it isn't better or worse, it is different; a blend of social and medical intercourse where the balance of these two components is decided by the individual. It can be a café, a place to go for a chat, a library, a place to go to learn, a clinic to see a Health Care Professional and receive expert advice. Patients and family are welcome as individuals recognizing that both may have needs or concerns. If anyone is interested in more details www.maggiescentres.org is the link.

I haven't answered the WHY did I do it? It was partly by intent and partly happenstance as with most things in life. As a retired clinician I was interested in 'doing something useful' and had admired the Maggie's concept through the experiences of my patients. With that in mind I looked up Maggie's Centres and my eye was caught by the fund raising events that required volunteers to help provide the back up. From there I started to look at the individual events and immediately was fascinated by the 3Peaks in 3Nights Challenge. The rest is history.

HOW - This divides into two parts the walk and the fund raising:

THE WALK;

We arrived in Fort William on Friday night and with a mixture of trepidation and exhilaration, and after dinner' met our guide Scott and set off up Ben Nevis. It was a clear cold night with an expectation of snow at the top. The path we took was the 'tourist route'. The ascent was not without its excitement or incident but suddenly Scott was saying: "It's only 20 mins to the top." We were nearly there. At the top we took photos and let it all sink in. We switched off our torches and stood in total darkness and silence, each with our own thoughts. We then set off down again, the ice was not so slippery and the hill not so steep, to be met at the bottom by Jim our driver - and boy was he popular producing the best bacon roll I've ever tasted!! By now anyone watching would have thought we had climbed Everest not Nevis!

We all piled into the mini bus and set off for Scafell. The sunrise in Glen Coe was amazing and Maggie's had even scripted a stag to appear on the crest of a small rise as we passed. On arrival we moved into our rooms and got some rest and sleep before another pasta dinner (for the energy) and tackling Scafell Pike. It's smaller, often steeper and in some ways as hard as the bigger Nevis. We were all surprised by the number of people on the hill - what a lot of enthusiasts raising money for charity. We met the MacMillan group, and many others including one group wandering aimlessly in circles. We think they were the Dementia Group. The novelty value was less the second time, the sense of achievement just as much if not more. We reached the top, descended to yet more wonderful bacon rolls. By this time we were for putting Jim's name forward for a knighthood.

The bad news! There was appalling weather forecast for the Sunday night, such that safety was an issue. On our way to the welcome in the valleys we decided that we would climb Snowdon as soon as we could get everyone together and organised. We missed our rest period but were able to get up and down Snowdon in good time with Richard our guide before the bad weather broke. It was a good decision as the rain was so bad that many of the local roads were blocked and trains cancelled due to the flooding. Our train eventually chugged into Dundee only to find a flat car battery. Jump leads and a helpful car park attendant solved that problem and all ended well.

THE FUND RAISING;

This was the first time I had tried to raise funds though like most people, I donate. Where to start? Cold calling acquaintances and old colleagues by email was not successful. Existing work colleagues, fellow walkers and the good citizens of Alyth and Kilry did me proud. This was achieved with sponsor forms situated in local shops and Chemist, a concert in the village hall and an art show and sale. It was hard work, not always comfortable but well worth it. I raised just over £2,500 for Maggie's Centres and apparently that was more than was expected. So thanks to the people who gave so generously of their time and money, a job well done and one that was also quite a lot of fun. Mike Morris.

STOP PRESS: Following a meeting of the 35th Anniversary sub-committee it is confirmed that the Club will meet on Harris, centred on Tarbert, from Friday 5th July 2013. Come for a long weekend, a week, or as long as you like!

Katamaran to St Kilda



Skipper Angus was very proud of his new boat, Orca III, and she looked impressive as the five Island Hoppers boarded at Leverburgh. The sun shone brightly and, to everyone's relief, the sea was flat calm as the boat headed out towards St Kilda. As the powerful engines opened up the boat leapt forward but it was a pity that the silencers had not been fitted! The noise was forgotten as the islands began to appear and anticipation mounted. As the boat rounded the headland into Village Bay the iconic view of the dwellings and cleits opened up. In less than 3 hours from Leverburgh the RIB was lowered to land the party on Hirta. The jetty is dominated by the ugly military buildings but these can be forgotten once on shore (and without the military personnel it would be difficult for the National Trust for Scotland to maintain a presence).

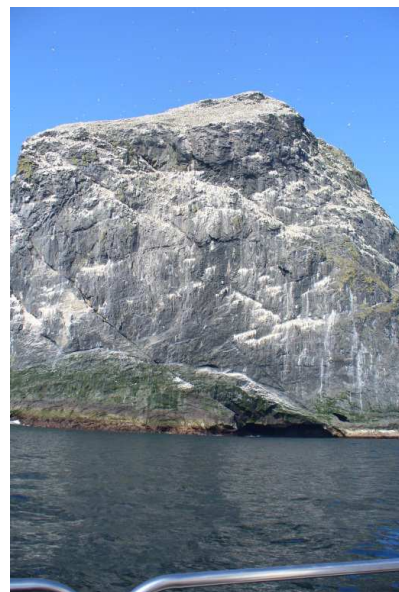
The powerful song of a St Kilda Wren greeted us from a rooftop as we climbed towards The Gap. This gave a fabulous view of Boreray and the Stacs over 10 km away – a daunting enough journey in an open boat in perfect conditions like today: imagine what it would have been like with a big sea running! We continued up to Conachair, the highest sea cliff in the British Isles at 430 m. From here there was a superb view down to the village and over all the main group islands. There were plenty of Soay sheep and bonxies around as we descended to walk along High Street.



It was quite poignant to look into the houses, some roofless, some reroofed, each with a notice painted on stone telling you who had lived here and when they had left, or died. One house is a museum with old photographs and artefacts; another is used as accommodation for Conservation Volunteers and one as a workshop. All around, and well up the hillsides were the beehive shaped storage cleits. The kirk, refurbished in a plain style, is hidden behind the MOD buildings and the simple schoolroom, accessed through the kirk, reflects a bygone age with slates to write on and fading maps as wall decorations. One of the party had to try out the teacher's chair!

After four and a half hours on Hirta we returned to the boat for a cup of tea and the skipper's fruit loaf as Orca III set off towards the Stacs. What an amazing sight! Here on these steep cliffs and grassy summits are the largest colonies of gannets, fulmars and puffins in Britain with thousands of birds flying overhead or on the sea. Angus pointed out the entrances to the stone bothies used by the islanders when they were harvesting the birds. The boat was able to go quite close to the lower ledges where guillemots and razorbills were nesting and the puffins were busily flying here and there or resting on the sea. After an hour moving round the Stacs and Boreray the boat headed back to Leverburgh and we were fortified by a wee dram as we watched St Kilda fade into the distance and then enjoyed the views of Harris as we drew nearer. This fantastic day out will live in our memories for the rest of our lives, and we are so glad we were blessed with such beautiful weather.

Rob Robertson.



Editor: Rob Robertson. Comments and Contributions from all members are welcome.