

Notes

HOW TO JOIN THE CAIRNGORM CLUB

'For easy things, that may be got at will,
Most sorts of men do set but little store.'

Newly arrived in an unfamiliar city my great desire was to get in touch with the local climbing club. I decided to consult the list of clubs in the latest copy of *The Climber* which itself is often difficult to find. However, no mention of the Cairngorm Club but I did spot this unusual notice.

Aberdeen—Boots repaired
by fellow climber
Baxter.

Obviously the Secretary operated through at least one 'cut-out'. At Mr Baxter's I asked for a tin of dubbin and then leant across the counter 'How do I get in touch with the Cairngorm Club?' He didn't give anything away — merely saying he didn't know himself. 'You should try Diack's.' This was a climbing shop in George Street. As I left he added 'Don't be put off by the outside.'

Diack's gave no indication of its business. With its frosted glass windows it could have been a bank or a dispensary: this impression was further confirmed by the interior. A clerkess looked up. I found myself saying 'Is this a climbing shop?'

'Oh Yes, just go through' pointing to a door marked 'Private'. I opened it.

'Mind the steps' she said as members of the staff closed in. What steps I wondered? They opened a hatch in the floor. 'Just go down.' A ladder led steeply into the cellar.

A young man introduced himself. What did I want? I explained. He made one or two 'phone calls and gave me a number to ring. As I left I said 'This is like a secret organisation'.

'It is a secret organisation!' he grinned.

So in this way contact was made and a rendezvous arranged — a street corner in a quiet Angus county town. There I was met, taken away in a coach and twelve hours later dropped again at the same spot. What happened in between is another story.

I smile whenever I think of the interview for my real life job in Aberdeen. They asked, 'You're not just coming here to climb the Cairngorms are you?'

PETER N. DAVIDSON

MIDGES GALORE

Several times the proposal to hold a meet with an opportunity of climbing Ben Alder has been made during the planning of the year's programme. On other occasions, members of the Club have been heard to say, 'Perhaps a small group could get together and do Ben Alder over a weekend'. However, the look of the map, and measurement of the distances involved, led to deferment of plans for a full-scale meet.

But Ben Alder has the irresistible appeal of remoteness and inaccessibility, with the result that in the early summer of 1969 its name was increasingly mentioned. It appeared that there was a bothy at Culra Lodge and that camping space was abundant. A group of Club members decided, therefore, to go ahead and try to do the deed.

A letter to the County Clerk of Inverness-shire gave us the name of the factor and of the head stalker of Ben Alder Lodge Estate. A long telephone call to Dalwhinnie furnished permission to camp or bothy in the region of Loch Pattack – some eight miles along the track from Dalwhinnie. And so it was that some dozen Club members converged on Loch Pattack one August day, prepared for great things. Flat and fairly dry ground near the loch tempted the party to camp there rather than to carry loads to the bothy, some two miles from the road.

On our first day, we climbed Geal Gharn, Creag Pitridh and Beinn a' Chlachair in good weather, with hopes of magnificent views on the morrow from Ben Alder itself.

However, as so often seems to happen in the Scottish hills, the following morning Ben Alder was nowhere to be seen! We set off regardless, as it was at least dry, and walked up past Culra Lodge – where the bothy is weatherproof and furnished with rough bunks – to ascend from the West side of Ben Alder. The top was found, with little difficulty despite the mist, and lunch was taken in the hope of a clearance. However, it became thicker still, and, wet with it, we made our way down to the Bealach Breabeg and so back to camp, either by the track or via Beinn Bheoil with variations from the correct route by one determined to see Loch Ericht at all costs!

Back at Loch Pattack the trouble started. Dense clouds of minute Highland beasties appeared to greet our return and obviously decided that it was a splendid opportunity for a banquet!

A variety of strategies was applied in an attempt to evade their attentions. One member of the party, accustomed to the midge of southern England, with its docile nature and modest appetite, went about unconcernedly in shorts until the full horror of their Scottish cousins became apparent, and then, putting on every available article of clothing, promptly retreated to the car! One tent was armed with insect-repellent, while another, occupied obviously by an experienced Scottish camper, was fumigated by the expedient of smoking as many cigarettes as possible as fast as possible! The classical approach also indicated experience of the beasties – meals were taken at the double, marching up and down the track with a fine net over the head and shoulders, raising the net at brief intervals to allow ingestion of a spoonful of mince.

After our midge-ridden supper, the head stalker appeared to see if we

were comfortable. He made us welcome and explained that the Estate welcomed visitors if they asked in advance; while they were advised not to go on to the tops during the stalking season, there was no objection to their walking through the glens. His comfort, or rather discomfort, at the jaws of the midges was soon at a level which caused him to retreat to the shelter of his house.

The following morning brought yet more midges, and torrential rain, so that some of the campers returned, itching, to Aberdeen, the remnant finally retiring hurt to the drier and less midge-infested region of the Monadh Liath hills – whence Ben Alder was seen in all its glory and the more attractive for its having been ascended, despite the attendant discomforts.

A return visit in 1970 revealed yet more pot-holes in the road along Loch Ericht, but far fewer midges in the area than before – maybe even a midge has a conscience!

ANON

AVALANCHES

In a recent *Scots Magazine*, Ben Humble contributed an excellent article about avalanches in Scotland, and, with the author's and editor's permission, this short excerpt is reprinted, giving as it does, some excellent advice which might be of use to members on their winter peregrinations into the hills:

'In recent years, both in Scotland and in other countries, there has been detailed investigation into snow structure and avalanche causes with a view to avalanche prediction, but even so, many are still unpredictable.

'Numerous factors have to be considered – the time of the year, the weather conditions for some weeks previously, the immediate weather conditions, and the nature of the ground below the snow. Apart from the cornice type, avalanches usually occur where the underlying ground is smooth and regular, while if the slope is convex the possibility is still greater.

'Just as excessive rainfall means possible flooding, so heavy snowfall means possible avalanche conditions. They may occur in stormy weather with much new snow, or in fair weather, when there is a rapidly-rising temperature.

'Steep gullies are, of course, the main sites, while in other areas the danger zone is where the slope is more than 35 degrees.

'It can be easily understood that where the underlying ground is smooth rock, avalanches are highly possible. The famous Red Slab of the cliffs of Coire an Lochain in the Cairngorms is the best example of this. Every year the snow slides down from it, while all other parts of the cliffs are still covered.'

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

19 February 1971

Box 354
Hudson Heights, Quebec

Revered Editor,

You in a crazed moment asked me last year to write an article on glaciers for the sake, I presume, of silly Scottish scramblers who have not yet trod them. Why I cannot tell; I am an unsuccessful prof. but am supposed to know something about compressed snow. True, I have perambulated on glaciers in many

parts of the world and have written the only significant scientific paper in my life on a certain aspect of glaciology.

But these dubious qualifications cannot make me the instructor to your panting readers as to how to behave on glaciers. I treat them cavalierly. Just before going to the 1948 Oslo conference of the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics (whereat for some obscure political reason I got named the secretary of the Commission on glaciers) I was wandering alone on the glacier below the Fanaråken in Norway and was castigated by a roped party for my folly. With dignity I pointed out in bad Norwegian that I was *the* expert on glaciers presently in Norway.

But I guess they were right. It is asking for trouble to wander lonely upon the ice. I do it all the time. My survival to date is entirely due to the configuration of the stars at my birth date. And I have never yet fallen into a crevasse – well not beyond my waist anyway. But I have hauled a lot of companions out of them and know full well what a job this can be. But the technique of crevasse rescue has been described so well elsewhere that I can add nothing to this. Only to reassure our readers that in ordinary mountain country (excepting the Antarctic perhaps) crevasses cannot exceed 50 metres in depth. Ice flows below this and closes the crack. So this is as far as you can go.

One has to have a special skill to spot snow-hidden crevasses by noting little changes in the surface. But I had to lead in 1967 a very tired group of climbers down a glacier in the Yukon in a complete whiteout. I could see *nothing* let alone little surface changes. It was a ropy situation – I mean I relied on the man behind me to tighten that rope if I went in. I stayed in the middle. Like canoeing the worst troubles are at the sides.

Scotland has no glaciers. A pity. We are told by experts like Gordon Manley that if our mountains were 150 metres higher we would have them. Perhaps the increasing CO₂ in the atmosphere may do the trick, but I fear that long before this happens man may have eliminated himself or so controlled the environment sufficiently to prevent it. But the mountains will live on.

PATRICK D. BAIRD

THE DERRY ROAD

Tom Weir, guest speaker at our 1969 Annual Dinner, referred to his visit in 'My Month' in the *Scots Magazine* of February 1970, at the same time making some hard-hitting, but entirely justified, remarks about the continuing frustration caused by the locked gate of the Derry Road – all the more galling to Cairngorm Club members since the Club has donated financially to the maintenance of the Black Bridge on that road. This excerpt is reproduced by permission of the author and the editor of the *Scots Magazine*:

'I had come to Aberdeen for the Cairngorm Club dinner, and was pleased to be sitting next to the president, Alan Watt, who brought his own chair with him. It was Maggie Gruer's fireside comforter, which is homage, indeed, to a fine old lady who played host in Inverey to many a Cairngormer. With 140 or thereabouts at the dinner, the Club could be said to be in good heart. They

have to organise a second bus for some of their meets, which shows great keenness when morning starts are sometimes 6 a.m.

‘What I wasn’t so pleased to hear about was the current situation in Glen Derry and its approach road from the Linn of Dee. Climbers, on payment of a small sum, have always enjoyed the privilege of motoring to Derry Lodge on the Braemar side of the Lairig Ghru. Now there is absolutely no admission unless you are on an official visit.

‘The explanation offered to climbers is that the road had got into a very bad state, and since its repair it has been necessary to restrict usage. This is causing resentment among outdoor folk, especially since the fine right-of-way path up Glen Derry has been bulldozed for Land-Rovers and some of the charm of the Lairig an Laoigh has been lost. It is the Glen Feshie story all over again.

‘At the Cairngorm Club dinner I made the point that surely they should raise a voice in public protest against the latter sort of measure. I think they must, and so should every other outdoor organisation in Scotland. The landowner has no moral right to bulldoze an ancient path. Certainly, he can close a private road, but even so, surely it would have been better to try to come to some financial arrangement with the clubs before taking this unpopular action.’

THE LOCHNAGAR TRACK

Tom Weir’s concern about the locked gate to the Derry Road is but one of the actions by landowners which give cause of annoyance to the climber. As he also mentions, the bulldozing of tracks in the Cairngorms has recently been changing the character of some of our favourite approaches to the mountains. First to spring to mind is the usual approach track to Lochnagar from the Allt na Giubhsaich, until recently a delightful track, but now a muddy, churned-up morass. Similar things have been happening in the Glen Feshie area, and other parts may be threatened. This sort of thing happens overnight, and, once the deed is done, so is the damage, and complaint afterwards can only be of use if it prevents further despoiling. One remembers the fuss about the Coruisk track – in this case, public outcry was so great that the Army stopped their no doubt well-intentioned ‘improvements’. The Club is to draw the attention of the Countryside Commission to these recent operations by landowners, and it is to be hoped that some amicable compromise might be arrived at with the landowners, which would take into consideration the opinions of bodies, like our own Club, which are concerned with the preservation of the countryside.

ALTERATIONS AT MUIR OF INVEREY

As reported in the Notes in the last issue of the *Journal*, the Club relinquished the lease of Derry Lodge at Whitsunday 1967. This naturally increased the demand from Club members for accommodation at Muir and the Committee reluctantly decided to restrict the number of places available to members of other organisations. It was agreed that Muir should be extended and improved

as it was for such works that the late Dr George Taylor left a most generous legacy to the Club. The Committee decided, however, that no extensive alterations should be made until the Hut, which had been leased since 1949, was the Club's own property.

Negotiations were begun in 1968 with Captain Alexander Ramsay of Mar and terms were eventually agreed. While these negotiations were proceeding, the Huts Sub-committee considered ways of extending the Hut to provide accommodation for eighteen persons. Plans were prepared for the demolition of the existing wooden annexe and the erection of a dormitory block with consequent alterations in the common room and kitchen. Provisional estimates of cost indicated that the money available from the Taylor Bequest would be insufficient and it was decided to apply to the Scottish Education Department, Aberdeen Town Council, and Aberdeen County Council for grants under the Physical Training and Recreation Act, 1937. So far, offers of grants of £3,700 from the Department and £172.80 from the County Council have been received.

The position as the *Journal* goes to press is that estimates for the various works amounting to £10,000 have been accepted and that the works are about to be begun.

