

Midsummer excursions

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In the Club *Journal* of 1932 there is a brief report of what is described as 'the Summer Solstice Excursion'. The then President, James McCoss, had a keen interest in astronomy as well as mountaineering, and although the high-sounding title did not survive his presidency the Midsummer Overnight Excursion introduced by him has featured in the Club programme now for more than 40 years. It has been my good fortune to have attended the first of these excursions and a good many since, and I hope that some personal recollections may be of interest to readers of the *Journal*.

The first Excursion was to Bennachie – not a very ambitious start, certainly, but from small beginnings great things develop. The night was cloudy and after visiting the Mither Tap we went on to Oxen Craig which was reached at 2.30 am. There, according to the official report, 'tea was partaken by the members'.

Perhaps I was not over-impressed with the possibilities thus opened up to members as I did not attend the Summer Solstice Excursion the following year. The loss was mine, however, for the *Journal* tells us that the excursion to Lochnagar in 1933 was so successful that 'the Club has probably never held an outing with more satisfactory results'. The Astronomer noted that Mars and Jupiter kept the party company all night and that Arcturus was also prominent at one point in the ascent.

In 1934 President William Malcolm took us through the Lairig Ghru. This excursion is described in more sober terms as having been in all respects a most enjoyable one. It is interesting to recall that we went up to Boat of Garten on the Speyside Excursion train, the fare being 3s. (which would have covered the return), and then on to Aviemore for a few pence more. It was a beautiful summer evening by the time we left Aviemore and I have particularly pleasant memories of my first walk through the Lairig.

I missed the excursion to Ben Avon the following year. The ascent was from Invercauld by the Bealach Dearg and the return over Carn Eas and down the Slugain. Conditions at the summit were described as calm and beautiful.

In 1936 we had a grand night for the Lairig an Laoigh. Again we set out from Aberdeen on the Speyside Excursion train and this duly landed us at Nethy Bridge, where high tea, now a recognised part

of the programme, was much enjoyed. It was a night for the heights, and I can remember a large party congregating at the Barns of Bynack around midnight. In spite of an order from the Chief Constable of Kincardine for silence during the hours of darkness, there was little peace. Some were up and going long before sunrise and the Shelter Stone had early morning visitors. For most of us it was sufficient to descend over A' Choinneach to the Avon and take the Lairig an Laoigh track to Derry and the Linn.

In 1937 it was again a Speyside to Deeside walk, but this was a special occasion. We were to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Club by a visit to its birthplace at the head of Loch Avon. This must have been about the last of the Club's journeys up Speyside by train, journeys which were in themselves a pleasure. It was a non-stop run to Dufftown after which there was a very interesting stretch of the line down the Fiddich to Craigellachie and then on up Speyside, following the bends of the river past pretty little stations like Ballindalloch, Advie and Cromdale. It was sad to see them again, a quarter of a century later, shabby and neglected. There is, however, a possibility that part at least of the line may be in use again before very long. I hope that as soon as a steam engine again pulls a train out of Boat of Garten for Aviemore our Committee will see fit to organise another Speyside to Deeside excursion and that the Club Circular will announce that the party will go by motor-coach to Boat of Garten and thence by rail to Aviemore Junction!

But I am digressing and must return to 1937. After tea at Nethy Bridge, we set off through the pine trees to Forest Lodge and on by the track to Rynethin and Ryvoan. From there parties went their various ways, some over Ben Bynack and some over Cairngorm, but all heading for the Shelter Stone. Most of us chose the line of least resistance and went up by the side of the stream between Ben Bynack and Cairngorm. It was a very pleasant walk for the first few miles but higher up there was rough going before we got to the Saddle, and by the time we were half-way along Loch Avon the light was fading with cloud low down the hillsides. Eventually all reached the Shelter Stone where President Dr David Levack presided over this special extraordinary meeting of the Club. About a dozen of us spent the next three hours under the Shelter Stone, and in the early morning we headed for the Linn by Coire Etchachan and Glen Derry. A few of the more ambitious members of the company left the Shelter Stone early intending to cross Ben Macdhuì. They failed to appear at the Linn by the appointed hour or within a reasonable time thereafter. To

wait or not to wait is a question which has plagued successive Presidents over the years, particularly on overnight excursions. It has now become recognised that the many must not suffer for the few and that a President must, after a reasonable time, give the order to move off, abandoning the laggards. A former Meets Secretary, E. W. Smith, took a hard line here and regarded late comers as lacking in consideration for others or just plain incompetent. A recovery operation has always been arranged, and the guilty parties have suffered nothing worse than on occasion missing a meal for which they had already paid.

In 1938 the overnight excursion was from Cockbridge over Ben Avon to Braemar, and in 1939 there was another Speyside to Deeside walk. I was unable to attend either of these excursions but gather from the *Journal* that both were duly carried through in spite of wind and bad weather.

Having given some account of the earlier overnight excursions and brought the record up to the beginning of the Second World War, I must skim over the next 35 years, with perhaps a brief reference to the highlights of that period. The activities of the Club were very much restricted till 1946, but there were a few overnight walks such as Ballater to Braemar over Lochnagar. In the early post-war years Speyside to Deeside was still the favourite route with Blair Atholl to the Linn of Dee as an occasional variation. I see from the records that there was a night in the Gaick and Drumochter area in 1948, when President E. B. Reid took some of the party over the Minigaig Pass from Glen Bruar to Glen Tromie.

It came to be realised, however, that the overnight excursion gave scope for going further afield, and in 1952, with President W. M. Duff, we set off on a Saturday afternoon for Tummel and Loch Rannoch. We were able to get our bus as far as the Hydro-Electric dam at the south-west end of Loch Ericht from where we made our various ways to Dalwhinnie. My outstanding recollection is of the view from the summit of Beinn Eibhinn. In the clear light of early morning, all the tops from Ben More and Ben Lui in the south round by the Black Mount and the Glencoe Hills to Ben Nevis stood out against a pale blue sky. To the east, however, there was not a hill to be seen, but curious humps of cloud like cotton wool rose here and there from a sea of mist. It took us a few moments to realise that the humps were Ben Alder and the summits across the Bealach Dubh. By 8.0 am we were coming off Carn Dearg to the Culrea path, and I venture to think that my good companions, Ruth Jackson and

Marion Hoggarth, have never, before or since, bagged four new Munros before breakfast-time on a Sunday morning!

Other good nights come to mind in abundance, but a special mention must be given to an 'allnighter' in the 1950s, which took us for the first time beyond the Great Glen. The route in 1959 was from Glen Cluanie to Loch Affric, which allowed of many interesting variations. It was a perfect night and I can remember a few of us resting at the summit of Sgùrr nan Conbhairean around midnight with a full moon coming up over the hills to the south of Glen Cluanie.

In the 1960s, the Grey Corries deserve at least a three-star rating for the overnight accommodation as well as for the three Munros crossed on the way to Glen Nevis. But the highlight of that decade, if not of a lifetime, must be the crossing in 1966 from the road above Dundonnell to Kinlochewe. None of us who climbed up from Loch an Nid in the early morning over the white quartz slabs on the east flank of Sgurr Ban will forget the magnificent view which we got from the summit, with the hills of Harris showing clearly across the Minch.

We are now half way through the 1970s, but it is unlikely that the Club will have a better midnight excursion than the second crossing from Glen Cluanie to Loch Affric in 1973. It would take a whole *Journal* to cover adequately the adventures of the various parties, but there can hardly have been a Munro within 5 miles of the head of Loch Affric which was not climbed that night. It is regrettable to have to record that the President's party failed to reach the bus on time next morning – or indeed within a reasonable time thereafter. This was certainly not due to lack of consideration for others and it cannot have been due to incompetence. Perhaps the party suffered from a surfeit of seniority, or perhaps the steep slopes of Sgùrr nan Ceathreamhnan should have been tackled the night before, but at 7.0 am on the summit we still felt that we had time to follow the ridge to An Socach and drop down to upper Glen Affric with three hours to reach the bus at the head of Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin. We had, however, grossly underestimated the distance down the glen. It was some consolation to find that we were not the only defaulters, and a very real consolation to drink the tea which was brewed for us at the burn side. Apologies and thanks must, however, be recorded to the Meets Secretary, who organised the recovery operation, to the long-suffering Mr. Duguid, who had an extra round trip of some 40 miles, and to the rest of the party, who had to wait for us.

Perhaps a word of warning should be given to any members who have not yet been on a Summer Solstice Excursion and who may feel

tempted by what they have read to book for the next one. There are not always perfect nights and magnificent views from the summits with glorious mornings to follow. If truth be told, there have been nights of cloud and rain. On such a night there took place the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Excursion to the Shelter Stone in 1962, which will go down in history like the 'Wet Review'. There were snow showers on Beinn Dearg and Beinn a' Ghlo in 1957; the hills between Glen Shiel and Glen Quoich, enshrouded in mist, have baffled more than one party; but only once was the weather so atrocious that the programme had to be abandoned. In 1961 we arrived at Inveroran on a wild night of wind and rain, and it was decided not to attempt crossing the tops of the Black Mount. The bus was taken round to Kingshouse Inn as it was thought that conditions there might be better. Only one party, however, consisting of three strong lady climbers, had the courage to set out for the hills. The rest of us sought temporary shelter in Kingshouse Inn before returning to spend a cramped and almost sleepless night in the bus. Any fears for the safety of our ladies were allayed next morning when they re-appeared, looking remarkably fresh and cheerful, if modestly reticent about their overnight activities. It transpired later that they had spent a comfortable night half a mile away in the Ladies' Scottish Climbing Club hut at Black Rock!

A recent recruit to the Club, examining the Summer programme with interest and apparently regarding the Midsummer Excursion with some misgivings, asked, 'What do you *do* all night?' It is as difficult to answer that question as it is to fill in the required particulars of your intended route in the Meets Secretary's notebook, which is now circulated in the bus. On the overnight Excursion from Glen Quoich to Glen Shiel a few years ago it would have needed the gift of second sight to enable two ladies to state their route which turned out to be – Sgurr a' Mhaoraich, Kinlochhourn, breakfast at the big house, a lift to Invergarry, rejoining the bus at Invermoriston – all of which goes to show one never knows what one will do from one day to the next!

