

## THE REGIONAL SUMMITS

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All over the country in 1977 people were planning ways of raising money to aid the Queen's Silver Jubilee Appeal Fund. In June of that year, I took the notion of getting myself and anyone else who might be interested, sponsored to ascend, during the month of July, to the highest point in each of the new Regions and Islands Council areas in Scotland. Mechanised transport could be used on approach roads, but the actual hills would of course be ascended on foot. In Scotland there are nine Local Government Regions and three Islands Council areas, and so twelve hills had to be climbed. To ascertain which twelve occasioned some research involving ordnance survey maps, maps showing the new regional boundaries, and the Local Government Act of 1973 itself. The research produced the following table:—

Regional or Islands Council Area.	Highest Point	Height above sea level
Grampian	Ben Macdhui	4300 ft.
Highland	Ben Nevis	4418 ft.
Western Isles	Clisham (Harris)	2622 ft.
Strathclyde	Ben Lui	3708 ft.
Central	Ben More (Criannlarich)	3843 ft.
Tayside	Ben Lawers	3984 ft.
Fife	West Lomond	1712 ft.
Lothian	Blackhope Scar (Moorfoots)	2137 ft.
Borders	Broad Law	2754 ft.
Dumfries and Galloway	Merrick	2764 ft.
Orkney	Ward Hill of Hoy	1565 ft.
Shetland	Ronas Hill	1475 ft.

Approaches to possible sponsors soon showed that the exercise would be worthwhile in terms of its financial objective and I went on to plan possible itineraries. I was satisfied that none of the ascents would involve mountaineering in any technical sense: nor was I out to break any records. The project would merely be an exercise in travel over land and water and up-and-down hill-walking within a set period of time. Having regard to the convenience of potential companions and because of the need to be at home at certain times during the month, I divided the project into four separate circuits. The first would cover Strathclyde, Central, Western Isles, Highland, and Tayside: the second would take in Fife, Lothian, Borders, and Galloway: the third was to be Shetland and Orkney: and the last would be the "home beat" — Ben Macdhui.



*Circuit one*

On 2nd July I set off in the car for Perth, where I collected the circuit-companion, kinsman George Scott of St. Andrews. The first two nights were to be spent at Tyndrum (for Ben Lui and Ben More). The next day was fine with rising mists and we took the well-known track (now a forestry road, not open to vehicles) from the "Oban" station to Coninish. Ben Lui was then ascended by its north ridge and descended by the Beinn Oss bealach and the Allt Coire Laoigh. It was George's first visit to the mountain, so it was good that it was looking so impressive. On the way back along the forestry road we met by chance a close friend of George's daughter. Next day, in similarly fine conditions, we made the usual slog up the north-west slope of Ben More, returning more pleasantly by the Stobinian saddle and Benmore Glen. Stobinian himself beckoned, but so did Father Time, and he won. Our wish was to drive as far north as possible that day to shorten the journey to Harris on the morrow; in the event we reached Fort-William.

Next day the feet were at rest, and the time was ours, provided only that we caught the 8 p.m. car-ferry from Uig to Tarbert. Everything on the way showed up splendidly — the Cluanie Ridge, the Five Sisters, Sgurr nan Gillean and Am Bhasteir from Sligachan . . . . . We had time to deviate in Skye by Dunvegan and linger a little on a lochan-side. When we arrived at Portree, we found in Somerled Square a young evangelical preacher, in casual mufti, holding forth to the holiday-makers, supported by hymns in modern idiom sung by a bevy of good-looking young women. The Minch was dead calm. As the ship approached Tarbert, the sun, having worked hard for us all day, disappeared impressively behind the Harris sky-line. One remembered the title "Enchanted Isles" in a MacBrayne brochure some years ago.

The Tarbert motel was new and comfortable, so near the pier that, in driving to it from the ship, you were never out of first gear. The morning was again fine. The plan was to ascend Clisham from a high point on the Tarbert-Stornoway road, but first we took time off to drive south to Rodel through a blissfully remote land, with, on the west side, some magnificent stretches of machair and white sands. By the end of the forenoon we were driving up the single-track road north from Tarbert. We parked in an old quarry just north of Loch a' Mhorghain (616ft.), and from there we walked up a slope and over the moor to the south-east ridge of the mountain. It is quite steep, with plenty of boulders higher up. The view was good, and without the heat-haze, it would be magnificent. In the afternoon we drove on to Stornoway, over the Lewis moorland, which is all space and horizon — a fine sight in the continuing sunshine. We agreed that "The Clisham" (as the locals call it) and the other summits in the area are well worth exploring.



In Stornoway we enjoyed the hospitality of the Rector of the Nicholson Institute. It was good to learn about this interesting town from one of its leading citizens. Next day, the Minch was re-crossed by the northern route on the 1.30 p.m. sailing from Stornoway to Ullapool, and from there we drove straight to Fort-William in the evening.

The next objective was of course Ben Nevis, which we reached by the normal "tourist" path. This was our first summit under mist but it was intermittent and there were a few striking glimpses into the great corrie, with some corncicing still in position. The path was well populated by many nations in varied garb and footwear, some of the latter being as usual highly unsuitable for this quite rough track.

Next day — the last of the circuit — was a mixture of driving and walking. As we crossed Ballachulish Bridge there were furtive glances at undone Mamores, but it had to be Lawers. Lawers was in fact quite beautiful; it was the brightest weather yet, with most of the heat-haze gone. The route taken was the now well-known path from the National Trust Information Centre by way of Beinn Ghlas. For almost the whole way this track is smooth and comfortable. There were many parties on the hill, including a group of botanisers from the Netherlands. I imagine that nowadays most occasionally hill-walking tourists tackle the summit of Tayside from the Information Centre rather than by the traditional route starting at Lawers Hotel, perhaps under the impression that, with the lift in the car to the centre high above Loch Tay, there will be fewer feet to climb. Remember, however, the bump of Beinn Ghlas to be got over both up and down. In fact we calculated our total ascent and re-ascent as at least 3500 ft., whereas the direct climb to the summit from Lawers Hotel is, according to the map, only 3400 ft. or thereby.

### *Circuit two*

The next round did not involve very high mountains, but it was largely new ground and was full of interest. The companion was fellow-club-member W.A. Baxter. The four tops involved were reached in the course of a long weekend. The first one — the West Lomond of Fife — was visited on the way south from Aberdeen, the car being left at a picturesque picnic-place near the summit of the Falkland-Leslie road (from that point the sister hill, the East Lomond, would be even more accessible). We drove on to an overnight base at Innerleithen in the Borders. Here there was some local colour: it was the town's Gala week and there was a brass band procession. This was most agreeable.

Next day we planned to reach the tops of two regions. Driving up the pleasant Leithen valley on the Innerleithen-Heriot road, we found a layby at its summit. From there we struck up over very featureless, soft and tussocky country to Blackhope Scar in the Moorfoots. This used to be the highest point wholly in the County of Midlothian, but, like Ben Lui, it is



now a frontier hill, with the boundary between Lothian and Borders passing through its summit. We made sure of attaining the highest ground in Lothian by tramping about on the west side of the sizeable cairn! Fine clear conditions produced a view as sparkling as the ascent over the tussocks had been dreary. But this would be a difficult top to find in mist. Down again, we drove back westwards to the Megget Stone on the road from St. Mary's Loch to Tweedsmuir. From there it was an easy ascent on a fine track to Broad Law, the highest of all the Border hills. Again there was a glorious panorama, but with a colder wind. As we drove on through Moffat to New Galloway for the night, we thought how welcome the hills and towns of the Borders had made us.

Next morning for the Merrick, we were joined by Sandy Sim from Edinburgh. Now at last the weather picture was transformed, with unrelenting mist and wind and rain from the south-east. It was the kind of day when one would not normally think it worth-while going on the hills. But we had driven over two hundred miles for an assignment at the top of Galloway and an effort had to be made to keep that assignment. As we started off in full waterproof order from the Bruce Stone at Loch Trool, our vehicle was the sole occupier of the car park. A path went north in the right direction. We followed it, first along a narrow wooded valley and then up the open slopes with visibility only a few yards. We suspected that the track would lead right to the summit, but we confirmed that by frequent compass readings. When we reached the subsidiary top with the beautiful name of Benyellary, the wind was particularly strong, and we saw nothing.

As we moved up a ridge to the main top, we could only imagine the scenery around us: but at least the underfoot conditions were at this altitude, superb. Lunch at the cairn was rather uncomfortable, and on the hurried descent by the same route, air and water remained the most conspicuous elements.

### *Circuit three*

The ascent in Orkney and Shetland seemed unlikely to involve major hill-walking, but on leaving Aberdeen for Lerwick on the "St. Clair", I did not know whether there would be problems in reaching the base of each hill. Ronas Hill is in the northern part of the Shetland Mainland, and some kind of transport from Lerwick was essential. There was no bus out in the morning, and the answer was a self-drive hired car. Driving up the north road (with much reconstruction in progress), I pondered whether a parking place would be found where wanted. Luck was with me: there was a neat little quarry right opposite the hill.

Even on the lower slopes the heather was pleasantly short and above about 1000ft. the ground was bare and gravelly, as on the Cairngorm plateaux. This phenomenon may result from the more northerly latitude.



It was a day of high cloud and clear air and from the summit virtually all Shetland and even Foula could be seen. Marvellous! But I was alone and would my kind sponsors believe I had reached the top? Lucky again! I spotted a mass of people following me up. They turned out to be a school party from Leeds. Their leader certified our brief encounter on the back of an envelope.

To discover a means of travel from Shetland to Orkney, otherwise than by air, involved persistent investigation. The main shipping line included no such passage in its publicity material, and an enquiry at their office produced a mere hint of a Sunday evening boat from Lerwick to Kirkwall. So on returning from Ronas Hill on the Saturday evening, I called at the Harbour Office, as the most likely place at which to obtain an accurate prediction of shipping movements. Happily it was open. Yes indeed, the "St. Rognvald" was expected to berth about 8 p.m. and, in ordinary course, would leave about 5 p.m. on Sunday with cargo and a few passengers for Kirkwall and Aberdeen. A cabin? "Oh, for that, you just see the purser." Sure enough, that evening I saw from the hotel dining-room window a ship gracefully sliding into the harbour. I hurried to the pier, where there was already a small number of hopeful voyagers. I joined them and got a cabin.

The voyage was a journey one does not forget. The "St. Rognvald" seemed a rather elderly vessel, but with comfortable cabins. Her twelve passengers — of diverse nationalities, including two French and two Irish ladies — spent a merry evening in a room which was both restaurant and lounge, and in which there was served a highly calorific high tea. One rather languid traveller seemed to deplore the fine weather, saying he "would like to have seen how she would do in a decent sea". For the rest of us the slight swell was enough.

Orkney was efficient. On landing at Kirkwall my thought was of transport (if any) over to Hoy, where the hill was. The Information Office immediately handed me the time-table of a boat service from Stromness: a return trip to Hoy in the morning, and another in the late afternoon. How very convenient! Viewed from Stromness, Hoy looked much hillier than the rest of Orkney, and the Ward Hill was inviting.

As it happened, the Irish colleens of the "St. Rognvald" — Rosaleen and Sandra — were next day also bound for Hoy and I had their company along the north-south track which leads through the hills from Moness Pier, where we landed, to Rackwick. Near the highest point of the path, I took to the hill eastwards up a corrie of rather deeper heather than on the Shetland expedition. The summit is on a long plateau, gravelly as on Ronas Hill. For the first time on these walks I was alone on a summit; it was misty and I traversed the whole plateau to make sure the top had been reached. The mountains of Hoy show very steep slopes in some directions, and from below look higher than they are. Obviously there was much



more to explore than there was time to cover and the island would repay further visits.

Next morning the journey home was commenced: the girls to Dublin and I to Aberdeen. The "St. Ola" ferry took a narrow course along the cliffs of the Hoy west coast, giving us a fine sea-view of the "Old Man". At Scrabster many of the passengers bundled into buses which whisked us straight to Thurso railway station.

The long rail trip from the Far North is traditionally tedious; but not today. The train was comfortable and full of cheerful holidaymakers: the land was resplendent in a crystal light. We headed out west from Georgemas over the great moors. Was this wilderness really Scotland or were we in New Mexico or perhaps on the high plains of Africa? And so over County March Summit and past Forsinard and such-like places with beautiful winter drifts to catch the trains. Then down the fair Strath of Kildonan, hugging the Helmsdale River. As the train sped along the flat East Sutherland littoral, there were glimpses of high hills with snow-fields on the south-east horizon across the water. I explained to the girls that these mountains were the Cairngorms – which takes us to the final chapter of this story.

#### *The last*

There remained Ben Macdhui. It was decided to make this ascent on 31 July, the last day possible under the rules of the sponsorship. On this occasion I was honoured by the presence of six companions – Bill Baxter (of Circuit two), John Low, John Russell, Fergus Watt and two American student girls, Barbara and Pamela. We were to follow the well-known route from the south. George Scott (of Circuit one) was in Aviemore with his family and there was a chance of a rendezvous at the summit cairn.

The morning was beautiful and as we moved slowly up the Sron Riach it was a joy to see the familiar ridges and corries sharply etched in the sunshine. But it flattered to deceive. A small cloud appeared in the north-west, and came rushing to meet us. As we reached the plateau, we were engulfed in mist and hit by harsh rain and wind. Athletic Barbara was first at the cairn, but almost immediately a youth appeared from the opposite direction. This was George's son, David, closely followed by his parents. Though conditions on the summit were not conducive to administration, sponsors at once began to hand over envelopes.

It looked as if some agent had contrived to put a cloud on the enterprise precisely at its zenith, because early on the descent the sun shone again and the evening was as magnificent as the morning. Magnificent also was the meal in Braemar which the company afterwards enjoyed.