

A LONG DAY ON THE CUILLIN RIDGE

PETER BELLARBY

It seemed as we drove through Glen Shiel that once again the weather would frustrate our plans. Cloud shrouded the highest tops and knowing that the Cuillins seem to attract cloud from miles around it didn't look hopeful. Yet there was a glimmer of hope - the sky was slightly brighter to the west and the weatherman had said it was going to be good. But would it?

I remembered my first visit to Skye many years before when a day trip from a mainland holiday had been made. Weather had been good on the mainland but thick mist had enveloped us long before we reached Coire Lagan. Then one of those magical moments occurred when for a minute, no more, the seemingly vertical rock around us was revealed soaring upwards, raw and naked. And we could see - could see the river of stones leading enticingly upwards. We were attempting the infamous Sgurr Alasdair stone shoot. It seemed the only sensible route considering our inexperience and the conditions. So inspired by our surroundings we started eagerly upwards. Never mind that it's something like walking up an escalator that's coming down. The mist was very thick though and we had heard you couldn't trust the compass on the Cuillins. Perhaps we weren't really going the right way. The rocks approached from both sides. It wasn't supposed to be that narrow was it? My companion complained. Vertical scree wasn't climbable and it was overhanging scree above that! Retreat was sounded. The Cuillin weather had won as it so often does. I would be back though and much later I did return to ascend the stone shoot and reach the summit of Sgurr Alasdair. This time the stones were covered with snow and the wind was blowing wild streams of spindrift on the ridge. It's much better so, for in Summer conditions it's a weary plod.

As we reached Loch Duich that slight brightness in the west broadened and then we could see Skye and see the Cuillins. Only small whiffs of cloud skipped along the summits. There was a chance, then, that the long cherished dream might come true. At 11.30pm we pitched the tent at Glen Brittle but it was 12.20 before we made bed. Alarm was 2.50am and we left at 3.30am. We took the path that skirts round the south side of the Cuillin ridge and which eventually goes to Loch Scavaig. Occasionally we strayed from the path as it is not always obvious where it goes especially when some way from Glen Brittle. It seemed a long way and I missed the skip in the step which usually accompanies an early start with an exciting target ahead. Perhaps it was tiredness from the previous day when a 5am rising was necessary because of a business trip to Edinburgh. Or perhaps we were just being slightly too serious and treading out a little fast at an early stage. We really did want to succeed.

From the path we ascended straight up the unremitting slopes of Garsbheinn. It's a mixture of scree and grass and bare ground, but steep all the way. Perhaps we weren't fit enough for the contemplated expedition. It's

certainly a test of will and determination, coming so early in the day. But what a spur to ambition when we reached the ridge slightly to the south east of Gars-bheinn - there to the east lay the fabled sea loch of Loch Scavaig and the even more fabled inland Loch Coruisk. The sparkling sunshine set the shimmering seas alight. Away in the distance the mainland hills showed misty tops, but nearer at hand only a few flimsy fluffy clouds blew gently along the tops. Such joy!

A few minutes and the summit of Gars-bheinn was reached at 6.25am. Consternation! McLaren and Shadbolt had taken 25 minutes less. The aim was to repeat their trip of 1911 when the whole main ridge of the Cuillins was first traversed in one day. We would aim for the same time since although fit we were not in our first youth and not superskilled at rock climbing either. Not for us the super express speed of just over four hours achieved by a few from the first to the last summits.

The extra minutes had been lost by sticking to the Loch Coruisk path for too long before striking uphill. You have to study the skyline carefully to judge the right moment for this. Still we could always cut short some of their rest times we thought.

Now that we were in the skies the steps seemed lighter and speed increased. Sgurr a' Choire Bhig came in no time and then Sgurr nan Eag. We had been here before several times so we knew the descent well and the deviation on the Coir' a' Ghrunnda side which is the normal route. This avoids some more tricky work if the ridge is adhered to absolutely. A delightful scramble. And we were keeping to time.

Then comes Caisteal a Garbh-choire, a curious stack shaped pinnacle according to Shadbolt in his account in the *SMC Journal*. It's not really a pinnacle though, more of a rough loaf of bread with holds everywhere on its steep sides. We climbed slightly on the Coir' a' Ghrunnda side from the col. The north end overhangs and I knew some people abseiled it. I once met Jim Simpson the author of one edition of the Skye rock climbing guide. I wanted to know if my 100 foot rope, of those days, was long enough for abseiling there. He ought to know but all he said was that I could always jump the last bit. Nasty thoughts of dangling at the end of the rope in mid-air with insufficient strength to climb back up are quite a deterrent so I still don't know if 100 feet is enough.

From a previous trip I knew it was possible to descend a little back from the northern extremity and this is the way we went. There is easy scrambling down with a short chimney near the bottom the only difficulty. The traverse of Caisteal a Garbh-choire is rated moderate in rock climbing terms.

The next obstacle is Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn. How nice it is to be able to trip this off the tongue and so impress first-time visitors to Skye. I should have known better as I had been here several times before but I went a little too far to the west and made it harder for myself than need be. Precious minutes wasted! Robin was wiser and reached the summit first. Robin was

Robin Howie who was my companion on this trip.

The Thearlaich-Dubh gap was next. There is a nice little scramble to reach the top of the south side. Then the rope came out for the first time in order to abseil into the gap. There are slings in place for this. The first SMC Guide says 'It is recommended that a party of tourists should not all descend into the gap at the same time in case they might have to remain there permanently'. Well we didn't see anyone, dead or alive. Someone must have told them that you can escape downwards by a moderate climb on the Coir' a' Ghrunnda side. Or else they found at least one of them could climb up and out.

The route upwards is 80 feet high and now rated very difficult. Originally it was diff. but with the passage of many climbers it's got rather smooth and is no place to be climbing in wet conditions. A few easy moves to start with are followed by a narrow chimney which you can squirm up inside reaching up for a good hold high up. Alternatively you can go up outside on smallish holds. Here is a jammed stone for a running belay. Above it seems easier. Next the sacks came up, and then Robin. All a little time consuming though. It's the most difficult part and good to have done it relatively early in the day.

A few metres further and there's deviation off the ridge to the col at the head of the Alasdair stone shoot and then a scramble to Sgurr Alasdair itself, the highest summit of the Cuillins at 993m. It's a marvellous viewpoint especially enhanced by the nearness of the sea. We could see the island of Eigg, with its very steep left hand face, Muck, Canna, and Rum, with its own Cuillins, a miniature of those in Skye. We could see some of the outer Hebrides too. We could also see the next section of the ridge, the abrupt prow of Sgurr Mhic Coinnich, and the ridge beyond, which rises from a col up the severely steep An Stac, or so it seems.

But time is flying; we can't spend too much time admiring the wondrous scene, but must hurry. It was back to the col and then a very short descent down the Ghrunnda side. There is a small gap in the steep defences of Sgurr Thearlaich which allows one to scramble to the summit. There follows the delightfully airy ridge towards Sgurr Mhic Coinnich. Nearing the col there's a slight deviation on the Coire Lagan side and then a difficult climb down to the col itself. The relentless rotation of watch hands and previous knowledge of an easier alternative led us to avoid the last bit by descending further on the Lagan side and climbing up a little to gain the col.

From the col a couple of metres up there is the start of Collie's Ledge which enables one to reach Sgurr Mhic Coinnich by a surprisingly easy, but circuitous route. Surprising because it takes you boldly across the precipice above Coire Lagan. But today Robin was to lead the more direct route of King's Chimney. From near the start of Collie's Ledge another scramble slopes off at an angle to reach the base of the chimney. A very competent climb was made by Robin and only afterwards did it transpire that this was his first lead of a difficult grade climb. It's hardly a chimney, more a crack in

an angle with some helpful chockstones in the crack. Near the top a short traverse right is made onto the wall to avoid an overhang, followed by a last little bit straight up. The rucksacks followed Robin and then I.

An Stac wasn't nearly as steep as it seemed. We enjoyed a quick ascent confident of the route as we'd been there before, and not straying too far to the right as I had done on a previous trip. Then the first human beings to be sighted that day were observed. They arrived at the Sgurr Dearg Cairn as we reached the bottom of the east ridge of the In Pin. We would have an admiring audience for the ascent and descent of the Inaccessible Pinnacle. Climbing the long east ridge unroped certainly made you think. At the crux step up you look down a long way. Doesn't one guide book say there's an infinitely deep vertical drop on one side and that the other side is even deeper and steeper? Still it's graded moderate so we shouldn't fall off, should we? On each abseil down the short west side the chattering voices of the audience stopped briefly. They are going to do it also shortly, and now they can see what is involved.

It is 12.45pm. We still have a long way to go, but the next difficulties are some way off so we descend the scree to Bealach Coire na Banachdich at a fast rate, happy that we still had a chance even though we were later than hoped. It's a pleasant scramble along the various tops of Sgurr na Banachdich and Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh. No anxious looking at the watch now - just enjoyment of the fine day with a gentle breeze keeping us from being too hot, and of exciting glimpses down towards Loch Coruisk.

Sgurr a' Mhadaidh main summit is followed by three other tops which require some moderate climbing. I was getting rather tired and glad to follow Robin who had been this way before. I hadn't and must admit to some doubts about the route as Robin climbed a little way up the steep face of the first subsidiary top with great confidence. It's round to the right a bit now he said and so it proved - not at all as difficult as it had first seemed. For the next top there's a steep climb up the face to get to the summit but there are lots of holds. The last top is easy.

Bidein Druim nan Ramh comes next and there was some confusion about the descent route on the central peak. We prospected a little way and thought it was a bit too difficult. We then tried a different line, putting the rope on as this too was getting difficult. We were in fact approaching the overhanging part of the north west side so perhaps it was just as well we had the rope. We returned to the first route which proved not as hard as it had seemed. Lower down we found an abseil sling and abseiled into the gap between the central and north tops. The latter wasn't too difficult, but Bidein Druim nan Ramh had cost us a lot of time. Robin later confessed that it was here that he had some doubts about a successful outcome. My doubts came earlier on Sgurr a Mhadaidh.

An Caisteal has a little surprise in that on the descent to the next col there is a steep drop just at the end. The way seems to go slightly to the west

rather than straight down but it was steep and we couldn't see the bottom and we were tired. Out came the rope but we had chosen the correct way so little time was lost.

It was now mid evening but we knew we could do it. Although tired there seemed to be an increase of speed and a lighter step. Maybe it was psychological or maybe it was because we had drunk every drop of liquid and had less to carry. Sgurr na Bhairnich, Bruach na Frithe and Sgurr a' Fionn Choire sped by and then there was the Basteir Tooth.

"I suppose we'll take Collie's Route shall we?" I said, hoping Robin would solve the problem by agreeing. The problem is Naismith's Route. We had agreed before we started that it was part of the route and would only be excluded if we were too exhausted. We should do it Robin said. So I didn't have any excuses now. It was half past nine as we reached the bottom. My heart quailed at the tremendous steepness. I hadn't been there before. Must have some excuse for not doing it. Can't think of any. Visions of falling off and hanging at the end of the rope didn't help. The full moon did help, though.

Rope up. Gingerly I step along the ledge that goes across the face. "Is this the correct way?" I shout. "Think so", is the semi-encouraging reply. Up a short step on to a slightly higher ledge. Must find a belay. Much poking in imaginary cracks, until a nut was lodged in a rather dubious crack. It would have to do. Robin joined me and there was a further gingerly stepping along to the point where I must go straight up. Seems a little difficult for a difficult grade climb. Much prevarication and then the decision. Grasp of rather small holds and pull up. Higher up it's easier. An easy place for a runner. Surprisingly large holds and then I am just below the top of the climb. Hands on top and a mantleshelf. The top slopes - hands are slipping. Mustn't fall! Undo mantleshelf, edge along a little to the right and I get up easily.

The top of the tooth is an easy stroll from here, but there's a nasty surprise. To climb on to Am Basteir there's an awkward little overhang - very awkward if you are desperately tired. Robin tries without much success. We put a sling on a nut for one foot and the other foot is embedded in my shoulder. I'm about to collapse as Robin gives a final heave and he's up. But I am not. An ungainly climb with a bit of a pull from a rope from Robin and I'm up too. We're too thankful to be bothered that we have left the sling behind.

And so to the west ridge of Sgurr nan Gilleann. The little chimney just before the gendarme seemed light relief after the Basteir Tooth. The gendarme itself was taken round the Lota Corrie side. Even in the gathering dusk it didn't seem difficult as Robin's prior experience of it told us where the holds were.

The summit was reached at 11pm. A quick handshake. The champagne would have to wait. We must get off the summit rocks while it was still possible to see. Some discussion about where to leave the ridge but there are

cairns to show us the way. There's a helicopter approaching! Bright light. Maybe it's the mountain rescue. Too tired to differentiate between helicopters, spacecraft, the moon and the planets. We stumble in the dark and lose the path and then regain it. We lose it altogether and the cold touch of slimy bog hits the feet. The Sligachan Hotel can't be far.

We have no bed or transport. We'll have to lie down in the grass - at least it's not raining. It's 2am and we haul our weary bodies the final few steps. A telephone call to prevent the mountain rescue coming out in the morning. There's a light in the Hotel! The manager is still up. Knock on the window. "Can we have beds for the night - what is left of it?" "You must be joking! You want a bed at two o'clock in the morning!?" And he repeats this for five minutes before agreeing to let us in. Much labouring of the part the Slig. has had in the past annals of mountaineering finally prevailed. Then he changed. "Ye'll have a wee dram with me won't you?" Skilfully changed into a beer, that was more welcome at that time and the next half hour's gossiping seemed not at all unbearable.

Breakfast next morning and a little embarrassed amidst the well dressed clientele. One trouser leg covered in mud, two large tears in the behind parts so I try to shuffle round the dining room to the coffee pot trying to look natural even though I am walking sideways. And the manager took us to Glen Brittle in his car. What a nice man!

So we made it - it must stand some chance of a record - for the slowest one day traverse of the Cuillin main ridge 16½ hours from Gars-bheinn to Sgurr nan Gilleann. We were elated. We echoed the words of the SMC Guide. It is one of life's most satisfying mountaineering experiences, Alps and far flung ranges notwithstanding. On June 20th 1986 an ambition of long ago was finally achieved.

