

THE BALLATER MOUNTAIN CIRCUIT — A Sponsored Walk for OXFAM

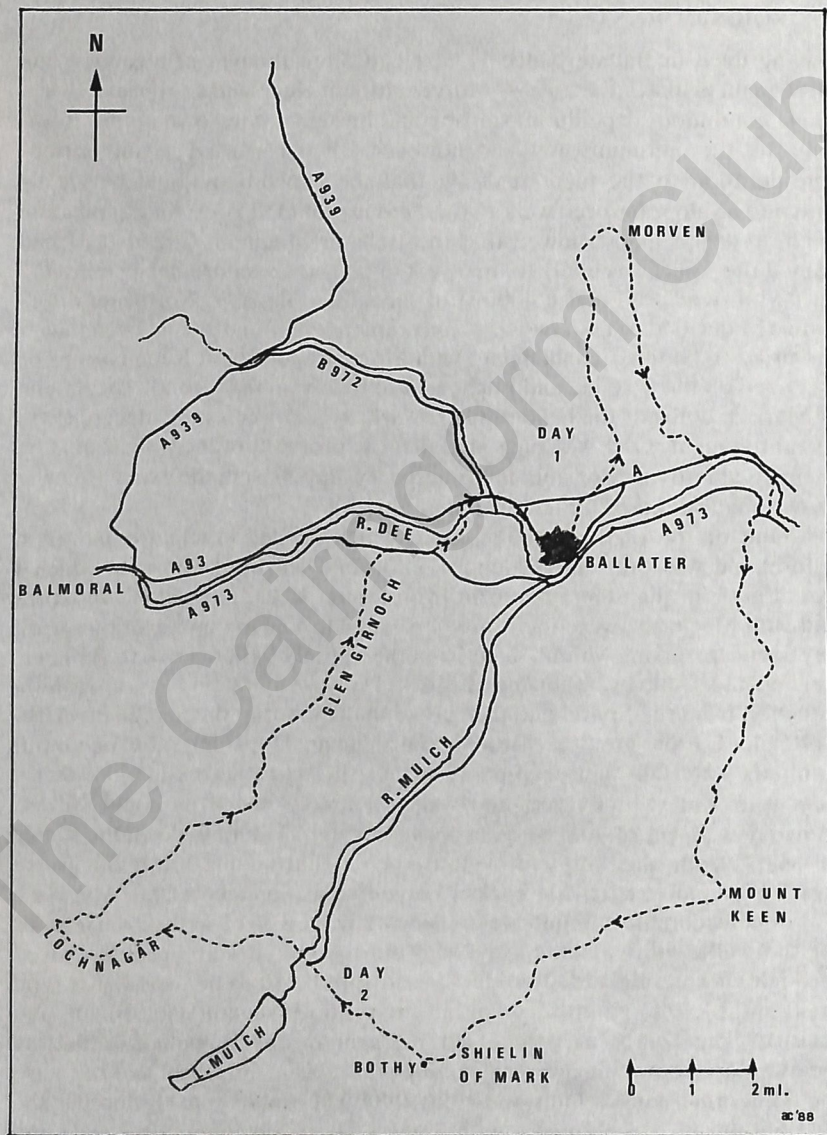
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Having lived in Ballater since 1975, I had often thought of ascending the three main peaks in the area — Morven, Mount Keen and Lochnagar — in a single continuous expedition, starting and finishing at my own home. It was only in the autumn of 1986, however, that I started giving serious consideration to the plan, realising that the expedition would be ideally suited to a solo sponsored walk to raise money for OXFAM. An examination of the relevant maps showed that the Ballater Mountain Circuit (as I had named the walk) was likely to involve a total distance of around 45 miles (72 km) with over 8000 feet (2400 m) of ascent and descent. Not being a fell-runner, I decided to take two days to complete the round — and even then it promised to be fairly challenging, with Morven and Mount Keen both to be ascended on the first day and Lochnagar to follow on the second. The Shielin of Mark, a bothy at the head of Glen Mark, was chosen as the ideal place to spend the night. OXFAM suggested that the proceeds of the walk should be channelled into the Mozambique Emergency Appeal, and the expedition was provisionally planned for a weekend in June 1987.

One of the sections of the route which needed detailed exploration beforehand was the remote upper section of Glen Mark, an area which I would pass through on my descent from Mount Keen. Donald Hawksworth and Bob Macintyre were therefore persuaded to join me on a glorious April day spent traversing Mount Keen from the Spittal of Glenmuick to Ballater, starting the walk by following the Allt Darrarie burn in a south-easterly direction from the Spittal and then crossing the moor to the Shielin of Mark. Bob and I took great pleasure in introducing Donald to the delightful tumbling waterfalls and deep pools of the Allt Darrarie, teasing him that a man who had seen Everest and walked round Annapurna could still be shown new places of interest on his own doorstep! The walk down the Water of Mark from the bothy proved to be an enchanting stroll on grassy riverbanks, enlivened by the rockier gorge-like section below Craig Michael.

A considerable amount of clerical work was involved in the preparations for the walk, with circulars to be sent out by post, posters to be displayed throughout Deeside and Donside, sponsorship forms to be issued, and local press and radio to be informed about the venture. Several good friends and relatives generously agreed to act as 'agents' on my behalf, collecting sponsorship from their own particular circle of acquaintances, and this gave the final total a considerable boost. My OXFAM contact was Liz South in the Edinburgh office, who took a great interest in the planning of the walk and provided help and encouragement throughout.

The expedition itself went ahead during the weekend of 20th/21st June, having been postponed from the previous weekend due to very unsettled



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weather. The Saturday dawned dull and grey, but at least dry, and by 7am I was winding my way up through the trees from the Pass of Ballater to join the Tullich Burn path, the wisps of mist on Morven soon clearing as I gained height. On reaching the summit of this peak at 9am, I noticed that the high Cairngorms were still shrouded in cloud, and I wondered how some of my Cairngorm Club friends would fare later that day as they climbed Ben Macdui and then headed for the Shelter Stone to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Club. As far as my own expedition was concerned, it was one down and two to go — but Mount Keen, my next objective, looked distressingly distant!

I had chosen the valley of the Culsten Burn (parallel to that of the Tullich Burn but further east) as my descent route from Morven, the idea being to cross the Dee by the Cambus o' May suspension bridge before making for Mount Keen. In the lower part of the valley I made my one route-finding error of the whole expedition, failing to locate a gate in the fence which marks the start of an overgrown path leading to the disused quarries below Culblean Hill. After correcting that mistake the rest of the descent went smoothly, and I was soon crossing the Dee and heading through the trees for a rendezvous at noon with Bob Macintyre and my wife Christine near the South Deeside Road. A pleasant picnic lunch followed, but by 1pm it was time to hit the trail again, my rucksack now repacked to include extra food and gear for the overnight stop. This heavier load would need to be carried for the next 16 miles (26 km) or so, over Mount Keen and eventually out to Glen Muick, where I had arranged a further rendezvous with Bob and Christine the next morning.

My route to Mount Keen took me across the Pollagach Burn and up the pleasant path which climbs up past Creag Mullach towards the Black Moss. Thereafter I followed the landrover track down to Glen Tanar, bypassing Etnach before heading for the footbridge at the foot of Mount Keen itself. A short break at this point fortified me for the long ascent ahead, which I had expected to be in many ways the hardest part of the whole walk. In the event it was not as bad as I had feared, and an unexpected encounter half-way up took my mind off the hard work — three hillwalkers, two of whom were being tested on their ability to perform rapid arithmetical calculations in order to study the effects of physical fatigue on the brain! I declined their kind offer of a brew and pressed on to the summit, arriving at 5pm. Although Mount Keen was still clear itself, a shower was passing over Morven and cloud was building up elsewhere, so it seemed that a change in the weather lay ahead.

After a pleasant 20 minutes on the summit chatting to a number of other walkers (and gaining some more sponsorship), I headed west across the peat hags and down the heathery slopes of Little Hill to Glen Mark. By this time a little light rain had started, but I had no complaints, as the morning and afternoon had been completely dry. I followed the river somewhat wearily up

to the bothy, arriving there at 8.15pm. It looked as if I was going to be the only resident that night, but I was interested to find from the bothy book that several parties had been to the bothy since my last visit two weeks earlier, when I had brought some stores across from Glen Muick. One item from the stores was put to immediate use — a can of lager! An evening meal of vegetarian mince and potatoes followed, supplemented by tinned grapefruit segments and strawberries from the stores.

The next morning I was up before 7am, pleased to find the overnight rain had passed over. I left the bothy on schedule at 8am, and was greatly heartened to find Lochnagar crystal clear as I crested the moor and made for the Spittal of Glenmuick. Bob's car was turning into the car park just as I arrived, and a second breakfast was enjoyed before I repacked my rucksack and headed towards Allt-na-giubhsaich with Bob, Christine and our spaniel Sandy, who were to accompany me for the Lochnagar section of the walk. We followed the normal route to the summit via 'The Ladder', but our progress was painfully slow — mainly due to the large number of potential sponsors we kept meeting coming down, most of them having ascended Lochnagar to see the sunrise on the longest day! Altogether I made around £50 in sponsorship from hillwalkers encountered on the expedition itself, most of this on the Lochnagar section.

A prolonged bout of photography at the summit was followed by lunch, but by 2pm it was time to leave. I had opted for the rather rough descent down the ridge to the corrie loch, one of my favourite spots in the Cairngorms, to fit in with my chosen route back to Ballater via Glen Girnock. Just beyond the loch there was a short shower of rain, our first of the day, and we wondered whether the climbers we had spotted high on Eagle Ridge had made it to the top dry. At the landrover track below Conachraig we went our separate ways, Bob and Christine returning to the car at Glen Muick while I crossed the low bealach near Little Conachraig and made for the upper reaches of Glen Girnock. There was some rough walking hereabouts, and it was with a certain amount of relief that I gained the Glen Girnock track near Bovaglie. This section of the walk I had reconnoitred on a beautiful May day on which I had ascended Conachraig and Lochnagar from Littlemill at the foot of Glen Girnock. Though much longer and in places rougher than the approach from Glen Muick, this route to Lochnagar is a particularly rewarding one, with the view of the peak from around Bovaglie on a good day being quite magnificent.

The walk down Glen Girnock was delightful in the early evening, and I was soon cutting along through the trees to the Polhollick suspension bridge, which allowed me to re-cross the Dee to the north side. At this point the heavens opened and I experienced the only really heavy rain of the whole trip, but by the time I had passed the Bridge of Gairn it was slackening off, and the last part of the walk down the Old Line track back into Ballater was mainly dry. I had been extremely fortunate throughout with the weather,

having enjoyed all three summits clear of cloud with only a little rain during the two days.

The end of the walk did not mean the end of the work, and for some considerable time afterwards I found myself involved in duties such as sending out further circulars, collecting sponsorship forms and money, and posting cheques through to OXFAM. The final total raised was over £2500, the success of the venture being entirely due to people's generosity and willingness to help — it may have been a solo walk, but it was certainly not a solo effort. My own memories will be of a most satisfying expedition in the Deeside hills, but more importantly of being able to help in a very modest way the poor people of a country so much less fortunate than our own.

