

THE ARDMORE ADVENTURE

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What were we doing here – four pillars of the Aberdeen establishment, aged 60-63, waiting with our gear on the west coast of Sutherland on a cold, gusty April day? It all began when Frank announced at a party that his family had given him a week at the John Ridgeway Adventure School as a birthday present. Three of us decided that such a challenge should be shared, so plans were made. There was no backing out now. Gradually others appeared, all aged between 25-40, until a group of 20 was complete. Most hailed from the south of England.

The scene was set. The chief instructor, Justin, introduced himself. Our luggage had been piled into a rather beaten up Land-Rover while we were waiting for a late arrival. More than an hour had passed by this time and we were all thoroughly chilled by the cold wind, a feeling intensified by our mounting apprehension. We knew that we were to travel the last mile-and-a-half by sea as this was indicated in the brochure. Justin led us along the path and round a small hill at the head of the loch (shades of the pied piper?) and introduced us to our transport. There were 10 two-man canoes on the shore and two larger rowing boats lying off. We then received the firm directive: "Right, you have two minutes to change into trainers and shorts and you are going to paddle to the camp at the other end of the loch."

We were shown how to get in and out of the canoe and we put on life-jackets over our clothes. I jumped in the front with Ian in the back and we were off. The honeymoon had ended with a vengeance.

We reached our destination after a considerable time and had to raft up with all the other canoes. Justin gave us a well-practised spiel about how we must be able to escape from an overturned canoe in an emergency. Ian and I had been last to raft up which made us first in the next act. We were told: "Overturn your canoe, bang twice on the sides to show that you are in control, then swim ashore with it and stack it in the canoe shed."

We decided unanimously that (a) this wasn't our scene, (b) we couldn't escape this unhappy predicament other than by the only route open to us, so we went over. The cold was intense and the shock beyond belief. I opened my eyes but forgot to bang on the sides. It was like looking through one of these antique frosted lemonade bottles. I baled out upside down and hit out for the shore 20 yards away. The life-jacket certainly ensured flotation but precluded normal swimming because it so elevated one's chin that it dictated a sort of doggie paddle. Having covered a few yards I realised that I had forgotten two very important things – Ian and the canoe! This was remedied smartly and we were soon struggling up the steep, stony foreshore to reach the grassy beach. Fortunately, we were helped by a strapping lad and lass, otherwise we would never have made it.

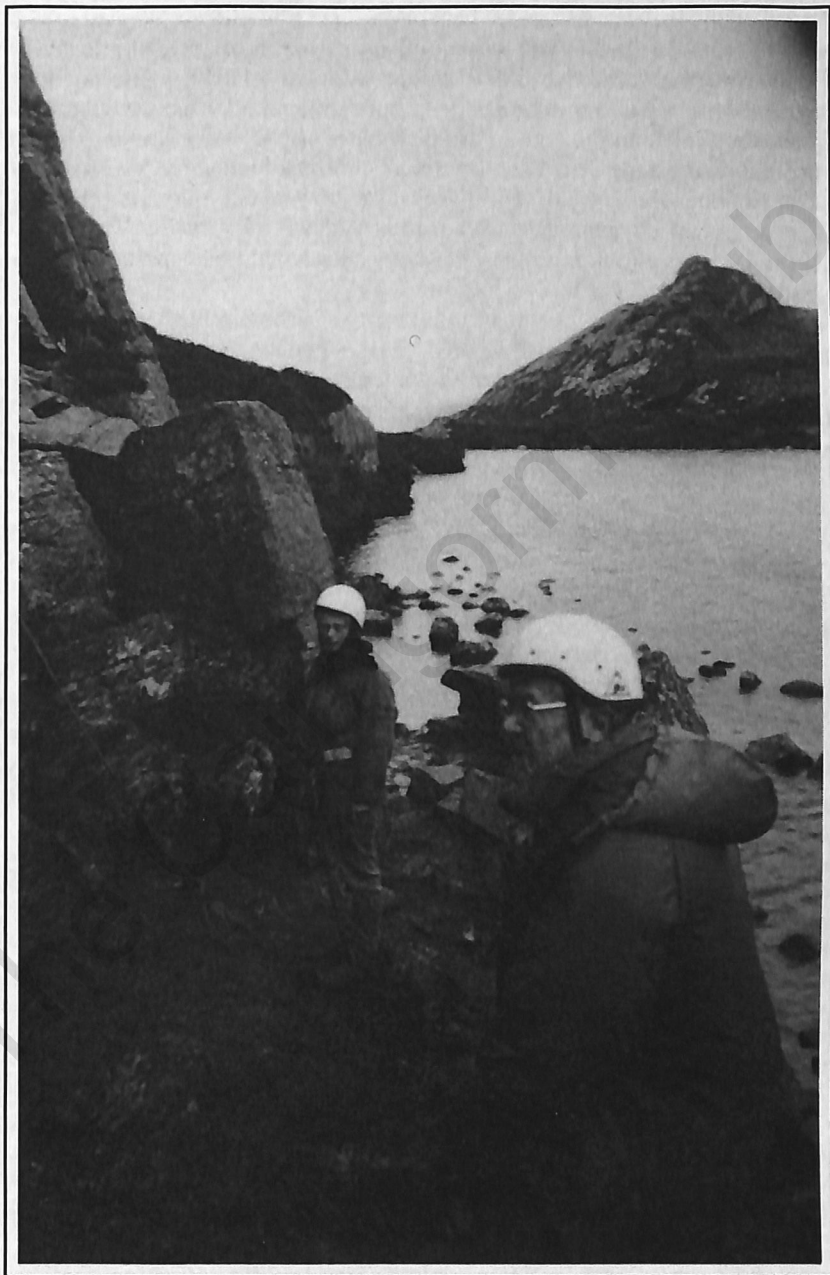
We helped each other to strip off our sopping clothes with the utmost difficulty, fortified by a generous measure of Glen Morangie. After a hot shower we proceeded to similarly medicate the others as they arrived. Frank and Jimmy appeared much later, very shocked and blue with cold. Having been the first canoe to arrive, they were the last to complete the ducking procedure and had to watch and wait, becoming colder and more anxious as they saw the rest of us floundering. Within the hour we were organised and soon enjoying a delicious meal followed by an introductory lecture and tour of the area led by Rebecca, John Ridgeway's daughter, who was one of the 10 instructors.

Sleep came very quickly that night, and we were wakened at 5.30 by the lovely Maureen with a mug of tea. At 6.00 we embarked in boats and went to the end of the loch from where we had paddled our canoes. We had three choices. We could walk for two miles and run for three, or walk for five. Ian and I decided to run while Frank and Jimmy walked. This became our standard morning routine followed by shower, breakfast and sandwich making. We then set off for Sandwood Bay. This entailed walking about 10 miles over fairly rough country and gentle hills, descending finally from high cliffs. It was cold and blustery with a watery sun, and John R. was half-an-hour late, which introduced a positive chill factor. We became used to being cold and wet, for the drying facilities were quite inadequate. The best method was to hang clothes on the fence and hope that the sheep did not eat them. The jersey in which I swam ashore was not dry until Thursday, despite being in the drying room.

We were off to the usual running start on Monday, modified only by the header I took down a very steep, muddy slope in the rain. Our group next went rock-climbing then abseiling. First casualty was Jimmy who cricked a knee by overflexing in the last step of the ascent, a sheer rock face about 80ft high. We were securely roped up but it was fairly daunting. Ian had considerable difficulty due to limitation in one knee following an old injury. He slipped and dangled on the rope several times before eventually succeeding.

It was amazing how quickly we had become a team, and how keen we were that each individual achieved. Our traumatic, wet arrival had united us firmly in adversity. I made sure that I abseiled first and was soon down. Ian was less fortunate, lost his footing beneath an awkward overhang and swung badly. He received a very nasty bruise on his posterior and was in considerable distress. Frank likes to be different. When he passed the overhang he lost his footing and completed the descent inverted but unhurt – apart from pride. Half of our gallant company were now retired hurt, and it was only Monday lunchtime!

Frank and I had to canoe across to a little islet in the afternoon, make a landing, run round it and return to base. This was a bit scary but we were learning fast. The return trip took much longer than the outward as both wind and tide were against us, but we reached home without a ducking. Fear certainly concentrates one's faculties. After an excellent dinner we would



Bob Ruddiman takes a breather after abseiling down the sea cliff.

happily have had an early night, but John R. had other ideas. We were to set off in groups of three at five-minute intervals on an orienteering exercise. Frank, Dave and I drew the short straw and were last off in the gathering dusk. We found the first two of our objectives, but darkness fell when we were 500ft above the camp and separated from it by cliffs and slippery slopes. Moving carefully in the dark we eventually found a house which we recognised, and reached home after 11p.m. to find Rebecca about to call out a search party. This ploy was to recur in various forms and we duly recognised it as a Ridgeway device to tire us out. It certainly succeeded as sleep was instantaneous.

On Tuesday, we set sail in John's beautiful yacht *English Rose V1* for Handa Island, the famous bird sanctuary some seven miles south of Ardmore. We were given a quick outline of equipment and procedures, and off we set in a Force 7 gale. Some of our group had not sailed before and it was incredibly exciting. We all had a turn at the wheel and learned a lot in a short time. The first possible landing site proved unsuitable since the anchor dragged, so we tried a second bay where it held. Our next trick was to leap into an inflatable dinghy over the heaving stern. We then had to jump on to slippery, seaweed covered rocks and walk to the beach. There was no time to feel scared which was just as well. We walked round Handa and found it fascinating. The island measures roughly one mile by one-and-a-half miles, and rises from sea level in the south where we landed, to cliffs of 300ft in the north. Here hundreds of seabirds soared in the gale only a few feet from us at the cliff edge. It truly is a bird watchers' paradise.

Our day was far from over. After dinner we went off dinghy sailing. We were in the largest one which had an auxiliary motor and doubled as the safety boat. Toby, our instructor had grown up on boats and was a perfectionist. He took great pride in carrying out all procedures immaculately. We very nearly got it right, having tacked and veered gracefully along the full extent of the loch for more than an hour without a hitch. All went well until we made to secure to a buoy. One of our crew misinterpreted a long string of rapidly-delivered orders. We had to tell Toby that all was not well, we were not tied up and were drifting. He was trying hard to grasp how this could possibly be, when we spotted one of the sailing dinghies broached-to on the ribs of an old wreck about 50 yards from us. Willy, the beautiful Dutch girl seemed in despair, so I added this little gem to the now considerable overload on Toby's mind. It was hilarious. We jumped into frenzied action. The motor was started and we pulled the dinghy off the wreck without damage. This time we managed to secure both boats in a smart and seaman-like manner and all reached shore quickly. Toby was still trying to work out what had gone wrong, while his fellow instructors were helpless with mirth, having watched the drama unfold.

Wednesday was a bit of a farce. Our assigned task was canoe portage, but we refused since the distances we had to carry the canoes overland after

getting them ashore were physically beyond us. We had a brief argument with John R. who then sent us on an orienteering exercise. We were given an Adventure School map of the area and off we went to find a dozen or so marked posts. Frank and Jimmy went clockwise, Ian and I the opposite. The plan was to meet the main party at the farthest point of the peninsula. We had great difficulty finding the first reference. It was off the map, and this ought to have alerted us. We eventually met up with the others, and set off again after a picnic lunch. The landscape was an apparently repetitive series of ridges, small hills and lochans making navigation difficult. We managed to take bearings from ridge tops to an island, and arrived home last and exhausted. We were late for dinner – no one was in the slightest bit interested in our epic journey, and those who had done the trip before knew that the map was wildly inaccurate. Had again! When John R. later recalled that he had nearly missed South America on one of his journeys, I was quick to suggest that he may have been using one of his own maps.

We set off early on Thursday for Lone Bothy by Loch Stack. Steve, the youngest instructor, Maureen and the four of us climbed Ben Stack while the fast party shot ahead to do Arkle as well. Maureen had to be put to bed exhausted, having attended a wake until 4a.m. following the instant dismissal of a popular but rebellious senior instructor. We soon prepared a superb meal of haggis, neeps and tatties and were warm, with dry clothes for the first time since arrival at Ardmore. Bliss! We had a short sing-song then had to face the major problem of bedding down for the night. Five ancient, rusty, ex-army double bunks with wildly defective springs and soggy mattresses accommodated 13 of us, while three camp beds occupied the remaining floor space. Fortunately, we all had waterproof Karimats and sleeping bags. The night passed none too quickly, hanging on to the side of the bunk to prevent falling out. We were up at 5.a.m. and away by 6.15a.m. after a very basic breakfast. The Foinaven ridge provided a most appropriate last day. It is a spectacular ridge walk entailing ascent from sea level to just a few feet short of the magic 3000ft, and is exposed for a long way with one near-vertical descent of about a 100ft. Frank has a fear of heights, but managed this superbly, following me and roped to a very competent instructor behind. We were on snow some of the time, the views were superb and the company was of the best. One could feel the prickings of incipient euphoria, but we were not through yet. The descent proved to be long and hard, and once we were at low level several miles of burn-side bog walking had to be covered to reach a metalled road. We reached the hotel at Rhiconich with tongues hanging out, only to find it deserted with all the doors open. The Ardmore Land-Rover arrived in response to our phone call, complete with cans of beer sent by the faster party. Another crisis resolved.

We had a memorable celebratory final meal with all the participants and instructors. Frank is a fine pianist and led the singing afterwards with gusto. We continued the revelry in the bunkhouse, then a very brief night later it was

time for breakfast. We bought delicious smoked salmon and made fond farewells. The Ridgeway family operate on a the principle of precept and example and set high standards. We had accomplished a lot in a hectic week and found it difficult to part with all these fine people. Boarding Ardmore Rose to sail along the loch, in a manner befitting proven survivors, now seemed a routine procedure.

There was a television documentary recently featuring an Aberdeen-based oil company team at Ardmore. Many of the participants were there unwillingly, and some clearly should have been excluded on physical and, or psychological grounds. Extreme situations were manufactured and things got out of hand. John Ridgeway and his team were portrayed in a poor light, and the programme left rather a sour taste. We should remember that the media often seek conflict for it's dramatic impact. This can be cruelly damaging, and once the smear has been made, it is difficult to refute. The trails of innuendo are devious.

We understand what the Adventure School is about and approve of it's aims – which are to achieve every day. The four of us certainly derived a lot more than we had ever imagined and our friendship is firmly cemented. We now set off for a week each year to have similar holidays in rather more luxurious conditions. I take my hat off to the Ridgeways, thank them for the experience, and wish them many happy and rewarding years for their hard work. They are now off on a family adventure for 18 months. May they journey safely and return refreshed.

