

RUM WEEKEND, MAY 1998

DREW McMAHON

Evening sunshine bathed Loch Scresort which lay beyond the lawn outside the tall windows. "Please all stand for a toast.....to the Queen."

"To the Queen!" boomed the company and raised the glasses of vintage port to their lips. A fitting end to one of the most memorable dinners in recent Cairngorm Club history.

It had all started as just another visit to the 'Bistro' room in Kinloch Castle on the Island of Rum. But it moved exhilaratingly upmarket when our party received a surprise invitation to use the impressive formal dining suite. The self-caterers that night were kicking themselves when they came in later one-by-one to gawp, because this was serious luxury: solid mahogany table and chairs, expensive wooden panelling and carvings all around the walls and ceiling, mounted stags' heads, large oil paintings, antiques and curios from around the world. The dark and brooding Edwardian grandeur would have been at home on the Titanic, but here was softened by the bright Rum landscape seen through five full length windows. In our motley collection of fleeces, checked shirts, and trainers, we felt distinctly underdressed.

"And I'd like to propose another toast.....to David Plant."

David, our organiser, was still at large in the forest outside. Was this meal yet another of his 'fixes,' part of his master plan for the weekend? What could he do next after five star dining, accommodation in a castle and a Saturday night ceilidh in Rum Community Hall still to come? Later, as Dave let rip on the dance floor in an energetic 'Hoolihan's Jig,' rumours went round that he really had been jumping in and out of different suits since Friday morning - dolphin, seal, stag etc. - as he strived to keep his 18 strong party entertained on the boat from Mallaig, and on the hill. Most people staggered out of the ceilidh before 2am but the six enthusiastic young musicians, from as far afield as County Tyrone and San Francisco, apparently kept playing till 8am in the empty hall, fuelled by Tennents lager.

The meal and the ceilidh polished off a Saturday full of big walks for most of the Club. A large bunch spent about 11 hours traversing the famous narrow ridges of the Rum Cuillin. Askival and Ainsival, the two Corbetts plus most of the smaller tops have inherited Norse-style names from the days when Viking longboats plied these seas and used the sharp peaks as landmarks. No such luck for us unfortunately, with everything shrouded in moist mist. Every so often a sinister looking goat would swirl eerily into view perched on a rock nearby, like a vision of Auld Nick. These days there are plenty of goats and deer on Rum but no sheep.

Geoff and John completed the fullest traverse, starting at Barkeval, taking in all the scrambles, and going beyond Sgurr nan Gilleann at the southern end



Some of the Cairngorm Club party on Rum

to include Ruinsival where, as the mist began to lift they enjoyed some of the best views on the island across to Muck and down to Harris Bay. In fact those who lingered at the castle that morning, and started out late, had the best of the weather, because after 3 o'clock blue sky and sunshine revealed all the splendour of the mountains and the rugged sea views. Bloodstone Hill, Harris Bay, Orval, Kinloch Glen, Loch Scresort, Hallival, Kilmory Bay and many other sites were all successful targets for Cairngorm Club parties.

The island is now owned and administered by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), the successors to the Nature Conservancy Council. SNH have 18 permanent staff living on Rum, all in the village of Kinloch around the castle. Visitors swell this number to about 100 on a weekend like ours, most arriving aboard the Lochmor, the Cal-Mac steamer to the Small Isles from Mallaig. The vessel stops in the middle of the sheltered anchorage of Loch Scresort and it takes over an hour to transfer people and gear to and from the shore on a smaller boat called the Rhouma. The name commemorates a huge racing yacht sailed in the 1900s by the previous owner of Rum, George Bullough. It was George's widow, Monica, who sold the island to the nation in 1957 for a knockdown price.

The Bulloughs were super-rich mill owners from Lancashire who bought Rum in 1888 as a holiday retreat for hunting and fishing with their friends during 2-3 months each summer. They spared no expense to build Kinloch Castle out of red Arran sandstone, develop the surrounding grounds (including a squash court and a lavish walled garden), and maintain a year-round presence of caretaking staff. Altogether the family spent the equivalent of £70 million

in today's money on the island. Rum was the second place in Scotland to have electricity after Glasgow. But in 1929 they tired of the place and never returned, leaving it idle until the sale in 1957. The Friends of Kinloch Castle now visit for regular working weekends helping SNH to maintain and restore the buildings and gardens. A party were in attendance during our trip.

The guided tour of Kinloch Castle gives an astonishing insight into the extravagance of the Bulloughs' lifestyle. It's like going back in a time machine to a different world. Each custom-designed room is dripping with expensive artefacts, some of which could do with protection lest they find their way into unscrupulous pockets or rucksacks. Guest entertainments included an 'orchestron' (a type of automated organ), a billiard room, and a ballroom which was designed with a sprung floor and also high windows so that the servants couldn't see the frolicking inside. Indeed, the SNH guide alleged a variety of spicy social and sexual scandals which don't make it into Magnus Magnusson's official handbook. Eighty years on, the ballroom is silent and the Bullough name and businesses have disappeared. Monica, George and his father John are buried in a grand mausoleum like a Greek temple above Harris Bay, with wonderful views towards the Cuillin of Rum.

The monuments to the original people of Rum are a lot more humble: a low wall perhaps, or a pile of stones gradually greening over, which once were houses - the only remains of 420 inhabitants who were brusquely cleared in 1826 to Nova Scotia aboard two unannounced ships. We saw plenty of these sad memorials on Sunday when we all strolled out to Kilmory Bay about 8 kilometres away from Kinloch along a Land Rover track. Whole generations once made a hard and unsung living from this rough land. The graveyard at Kilmory looks out over a beautiful sandy beach towards Skye. Only a few of the stones are legible, one recording the deaths of 6 children in the Matheson family from diphtheria in 1873.

The Cairngorm party rested on the dunes above the beach for a while and soon were ready for an adventurous return to Kinloch over the hills instead of the track. Everyone agreed to head for the modest summit of Mullach Mor - all of 304 metres - even Alec in his trainers and Eilidh with her blisters. The top proved to be a fine viewpoint on this clear day with a broad pavement of rock and a tidy trig point. Pamela was already deep in earnest conversation with Alec about a bird she had just seen. "It was mostly grey, with red feet....a white tail....green breast....blue beak....," ran the improbable description of this mysterious feathered friend spotted flying low across the moor. "A parrot?" offered Alec hopefully as others thumbed unsuccessfully through their bird watching guides.

Most people planned to go directly down to Kinloch Glen and pick up the good track. Brian saw his chance. He and a few others wanted to continue along the ridge for a bit longer "to take in the view" and then circle round to the castle. They said their farewells and steamed off. The race for the showers had begun!

Rum, 15-18/5/98

Geoff Cumming
Sandra Cumming
Eilidh Scobbie
John Gibson
Alan Dunworth
John Adams
Fiona Cameron
Judy Middleton
Ian Shand

Alec Hidalgo
Drew McMahon
Brian Davey
Geraldine Davey
Ken Mills
Gordon Stalker
John Elgee
David Plant
Pamela Strachan

