

Past Proceedings

The first volume of the Cairngorm Club Journal was published in July 1893. The 108 issues to date bring vividly to life the activities of the Club, the hills and the history of the time. With our current concern about changing climate, it is interesting to compare meteorological conditions, and to discover that extreme weather events were as much the subject for discussion then as now, as the following extracts reveal.

A Hundred Years Ago

From Volume V no.25, July 1905

Accident on Ben Nevis

A distressing and somewhat peculiar accident occurred on Ben Nevis on 6th April last, by which Rev. A.E. Robertson, Edinburgh, the well-known mountaineer, was severely injured. Notwithstanding that the day was a most unsuitable one for climbing, and there being an almost continuous fall of snow, accompanied by thunder and lightning, Mr. Robertson set out alone to make the ascent of Ben Nevis. He succeeded in reaching the summit, and on his downward journey the severity of the blizzard which prevailed made him rather keep further to the south than the line of the bridle path in order to avoid the cliffs, but owing to the mist and driving snow he had unconsciously deviated further than had been his intention. He distinctly recollects that the thunder and lightning seemed very near, and that the steel of his ice-axe hissed with electric sparks, doubtless St. Elmo's fire. It is Mr. Robertson's belief that a flash of lightning struck either his ice-axe or the ground near where he was, thus rendering him unconscious. On falling he must have been hurled with terrific force down a thousand feet over the frozen boulders strewn upon the hillside, but of what actually took place he has not the faintest recollection. He can recall nothing until he found himself making for the path from the direction of Glen Nevis, and at an altitude considerably over a thousand feet lower than the point where he calculated he was rendered unconscious. He had lost his cap and ice-axe, his clothes were torn, and blood was oozing freely from his wounds, but, as already stated, he managed by a supreme effort to walk unaided to Fort William, which was distant nearly three miles. Mr. Robertson, has, we are glad to say, now quite recovered, but bears more than one mark of his terrible accident.

From Volume V no.28, January 1907

A 'Cloud Burst' in Glen Eunach

We went to Coylum Bridge on August 7th last, and stayed in the cottage close to the bridge, a few yards below where the Drue is formed by the junction of two streams, the Luineag from Glen More and the Bennie from

Glen Eunach. On the following afternoon a thunder-storm visited the district, and the rainfall was heavy. In the evening we were sitting chatting, not having yet risen from the supper table, when we heard a sound of a most unusual kind, but not much unlike the rush of an approaching motor-car. Scarcely had we begun to listen when loud cries from the other inmates of the house called us out to look at the river. The mysterious sound had rapidly grown in volume, and now declared itself as the wild rush of the greatly swollen Druie, foaming in full spate but a few yards from the door. We hastily ran out, and looking at my watch I noted that it was 8.35 p.m. The Druie was big with dark water, and, swirling and foaming, was as impressive to the eye as it was insistent to the ear. Logs and tree branches were surging along, and what looked like the carcass of a sheep or deer.

A little examination of the streams at the junction, in full view from the bridge, showed that the spate was entirely on the Bennie, and not on the Luineag. I went up the Bennie just beyond the junction, to a frail suspension bridge that swung across the stream. Here by 8.55 p.m. the water had risen so high that the broken billows were shooting across the middle of the bridge. This indicated a rise in twenty minutes of more than three feet. Numerous logs and snags struck against the bridge, but its elasticity saved it, and it seemed to suffer no damage. All through the evening could be heard not only the rush and roar of the water, but also the bumping of the floating timber, and the dull, hard thuds of big stones rolled along the bed of the stream.

The generally accepted explanation of the spate was that the thunderstorm rain had overflowed Loch Eunach and broken its sluice gates: this however proved not to be the case. The keepers went up the glen the following morning and found the sluice all right. The spate was due to a somewhat local but unusually heavy rainfall.

I visited the glen myself, and went all round the upper region of it to see what evidence it bore of the rainstorm. There was nothing noticeable below the lower bothy except that the Allt Ruigh na Sroine had been running full. But beyond the bothy the drainage from the west face of Braeriach crosses the driving road, and here there was abundant evidence of the heaviness of the downpour. Some hundreds of yards of the driving road had been completely torn away by the rush of water, and where had been a road was a gully in the ground, the material previously constituting the road bed having been carried across into the heather and bog of the lower ground. I was struck by the value of the coating of the vegetable growth as a protection against such denudation; the bare road had been torn up, but the adjoining plant-covered ground was comparatively uninjured.

In Coire Dhondail there were no special marks of heavy rain, but on the other side of Loch Eunach, nearly all along the northern or lower

section of Ross's Path was evidence of a striking kind, more marked even than on the driving road. Numerous burns come down from the crags and slopes of Sgoran Dubh Mor and Sgor Gaoith, and across the path on their way to the loch. Each of these had been temporarily converted into a fiercely raging torrent. At each such crossing the path had entirely disappeared, and the deeply scored gully of the stream was bordered by great banks of rocks, gravel and sand, which seamed the hill-side for hundreds of yards, and showed themselves far into the waters of the loch.

From the relative positions of these two areas of destruction, it seems that the cloud burst crossed the glen obliquely from south-west to north-east, from the neighbourhood of Sgor Gaoith to that of the lower bothy. The condition of the hill-sides in the affected areas reminded me forcibly of the condition of Glen Dee near the Corrour Bothy after the cloudburst of July, 1901.

From Volume V no.29, July 1907

Ski-ing notes

The arctic character of the winter that has just closed has given ample scope for the enjoyment of the Norwegian sport of ski-ing without leaving our own shores. On New Year's Day, a friend and I ascended Bennachie from Oyne. We travelled from Aberdeen by the early morning train and managed to strap on our ski in Oyne station, and get through the village without any great demonstration on the part of the inhabitants. The snow was in perfect conditions until we got into the wood, but there it became somewhat heavy. We ascended Craig Shannoch, taking slightly longer than a fellow Clubman who was on foot, and then struck over towards the Mither Tap.

Once on the crest of the hill we flew downwards, soon reaching the woods of Pittodrie, then dodging in and out among the fir trees, kept on at an immense speed till we reached a farm about two miles from Pitcaple station. The good farmer was struck almost dumb at the speed with which we came down his sloping pasture: and on our enquiring how long we should take to reach Pitcaple we were informed that it took "about half-an-oor tae walk, but ye'd gang in about twa meenuts on thae things!" However, he underestimated our time, as we found that the snow on the turnpike was not in very good condition, so our progress was slow. On reaching Pitcaple we kept on to Inverramsey, where we caught a suitable train home.

On the morning of 3rd of February, four of us started from Ballater with our ski to ascend Morven. We wended our way up the Tullich Valley, and put on our ski about half way up the glen. On reaching the head of the valley we found the snow too hard for ski-ing uphill, there having been a thaw the day before, followed by a sharp frost through the night, so we unstrapped our ski and tramped up to the cairn. The view was

superb in every direction, but we were too anxious to try our 'Telemark' swings on the way down to spend too long on the summit. We put on our ski about a hundred yards from the cairn, and got a most glorious run right down to the Lary Burn, about two miles from Morven Lodge. The run was so splendid that two of us re-ascended about 800 feet to enjoy the return flight. We ski-ed down to the junction of the Lary and the Gairn, and then walked home, down Glen Gairn so well known to us when the trees are green, yet in that calm winter's evening, with the daylight flickering we found many a charm in the glen which she does not reveal to her summer visitor.

Fifty Years Ago

From Volume XVII no. 91, 1957

Luibeg Bridge

It is a great disappointment to report that Luibeg Bridge, which was built by the Club in 1948 as a tribute to our former President, the late James A. Parker, was demolished by floods following a storm on August 13-14, 1956. My reaction on receiving the news was one of utter incredulity, but the nature of the report indicated that no mistake was possible. The bridge was of particular personal interest, as not only was it the first of several jobs which I have enjoyed undertaking for the Club but because it had a certain technical interest: it was the first bridge in Scotland, and in fact, at that time one of the few in the world, to be built of aluminium alloy.

On the Sunday following the storm the President, Ewen, Bain and I made haste to visit the scene. Signs of flood damage appeared at the Canadian Bridge at Inverey. Its approaches had been torn up and the bridge closed to traffic. Rather extensive damage had been sustained by Black Bridge and the previously damaged access bridge to Luibeg Cottage had been swept about a mile downstream. It was very clear that a storm of extraordinary severity had struck the valley. It seems that the main storm centres must have been on Beinn Bhrotain and in the Carn a' Mhaim - Ben Macdhuì area, since there are signs of extensive erosion on both, while a washout on the Dhaidh, a tributary of the Geldie, has been reported. This followed a severe storm about a fortnight earlier in which some estate bridges were washed away, but it is not known whether Luibeg Bridge sustained any significant damage on that occasion. The scene there was fantastically unfamiliar. Upstream, the Burn had gouged out a new course to the westwards. At the site of the bridge, the bed was over three times its original width and practically central with the old bed, in which the abutments lay on their sides. The complete superstructure had been ripped away, and deposited on the bank about 100 yards downstream in a wilderness of boulders, partially buried in sand, shingle and vegetation.

Large trees had been uprooted and swept downstream and a huge hole had been torn in the moraine between the Luibeg Burn and Allt Preas nam Meirleach. The devastation will be apparent for many years to come.

Examination of the bridge indicated that the deck had been carried upright and bodily downstream, since one of the concrete footpath slabs, which were not attached but simply laid in place, still rested undamaged on its supports. As the deck was being wrenched from the abutments and before the holding-down bolts snapped, the main beams were somewhat bent at one end but were otherwise nearly unmarked. Extensive damage was sustained by the footway beams, bracing, and handrails. The parts were dismantled and removed to the safety of higher ground.

I understand that the Committee is determined that the bridge shall be re-erected. I believe that the girders could be straightened, at any rate to a reasonable extent, though the job is not easy on the rough site and without powerful tools. Most of the remaining members would require renewal. I have prospected the vicinity and located a narrow part of the bed with solid rock on each side about 200 yards upstream of the old site, where I feel the bridge could be re-erected by voluntary labour and with reasonable assurance of permanence, as the flood mark at the point is clearly visible and it would be easy to keep the deck above it. Naturally the bridge would not be quite so attractive for day-to-day use, though quite a small detour is involved if a path were once defined. On the occasions of high water it would efficiently serve its real purpose.

I should mention that the west pier of Black Bridge in Glen Lui was seriously undermined by the spate and that pronounced subsidence has taken place. At the time of writing no cars, except those of residents at Derry Lodge, and that only driven without passengers and at low speed, are permitted to cross. I understand that the Estate propose to institute repairs without delay, and certainly if that is not done before the winter, irreparable damage could ensue. The Club is making a substantial contribution to the cost of the repair of the bridge in addition to undertaking the replacement of Luibeg Bridge.