

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. I have chosen here two contrasting accounts of days in the hills, showing the best and the worst that the weather can bring!

A Hundred Years Ago

From Volume VI no.32, January 1909

The Six Cairngorms in a Day

Ian M. McLaren

There was quite a gathering of hillmen in the 4.35 p.m. train for Ballater on 20th June last. One large party was going up Lochnagar next day, and another was to camp out in Glen Derry, while we ourselves, five in number, were to attempt to conquer the six highest Cairngorms in one day. It sounded a big undertaking, and our friends did not anticipate that we should succeed, but at any rate we set forth firmly resolved to accomplish our task, if nothing unforeseen occurred. I may say that most of us were in excellent training, and had carefully prepared for the venture.

We left Ballater about 7.30 p.m., and drove up to Loch Builg via Crathie. It was a glorious evening, and every thing pointed to the weather continuing good. Leaving Loch Builg punctually at midnight we set forth on our long and lonely journey. It was quite chilly, though there was still a distinct glow in the northern sky. We followed the track up Glen Gairm, although it is two miles longer than the route by the county boundary, because it was easier going in the dim light. Before long we struck up to the right in the shadow of Carn Eas, and at 2.23 a.m. we reached the summit of Ben Avon. We did not remain long there as it was very cold indeed. The moon had risen by this time, and away to the east there were signs that soon we should have the sun to cheer us. There was a little mist hanging about Beinn a' Bhuidr, but it had quite disappeared before we reached the first cairn.

Pushing on again, we reached the foot of the Sneek exactly at 3 a.m., and at the same moment the sun rose out of the clouds. At 3.50 a.m. we were on the North Top of Beinn a' Bhuidr, and after this commenced the most monotonous part of our day. It is a very long and very tedious five miles to Loch Avon, the long heather with hidden holes and loose stones making us proceed very cautiously, and it was 6 a.m. before we lay down on the shores of the loch, and, after a most refreshing dip, had our first proper meal. It was glorious basking in the sunshine and looking along

the loch to the snow-crested crags at the far-end - the one drawback being the number of midges and other insects. There were plenty of trout rising at the flies all over the loch.

After an hour's rest we made a bee line for Cairngorm, and reached the top a few minutes after 8 a.m. The view was superb - there being as yet no heat haze. We recognised almost every well-known Scottish mountain, and viewed Ben Nevis with especial pleasure, as we had been on the top of the abandoned observatory at 3 a.m. exactly a week before. All the hills to the north of the Moray Firth stood out quite clearly, and we were very glad to be able to pick out without hesitation an old friend, Ben More in Assynt. Ben Alder seemed quite close at hand in the clear morning sunshine. Certainly 8 a.m. is an excellent time for a good view.

Unfortunately we had no time to spare, so once more set forth. Ben Muich Dhui (*sic*) was reached at 10.34 a.m., about two and a half hours ahead of the time we had allowed ourselves. After this we made our first mistake - we took too direct a route for Glen Dee, and found the descent over the huge boulders very tiring indeed. By the time we reached the Dee we were only too ready to have another hour's rest, and enjoy lunch. We started off again at 1 p.m., and ascended Cairn Toul by the ridge to the left of Lochan Uaine. It was hot work, as the sun was very strong, and the gradient very stiff. However 3.16 p.m. found us at the cairn. Although there was a fair breeze in the valley, there was not a breath of wind at the summit - in fact the first thing that caught my eye was a common tortoiseshell butterfly (*Vanessa urtica*) flitting about the cairn. I may say here that we saw very little wild life during the day. Some gulls near Loch Builg, a few deer at the head of Glen Gairn, several grouse, numerous ptarmigan, a snow-bunting on Beinn a' Bhuird, and a lizard on Cairngorm were about all we noticed. We found two ptarmigan's nests near the Feith Buidhe, and almost trampled on some chicks on Braeriach. We were also surprised at the small amount of snow, in comparison with what we saw at the same date the previous year. In 1907 the large plateau on Braeriach was one vast snow-field - this year there were merely a few scattered wreaths.

We left Cairn Toul at 3.30 p.m., and, crossing to the south of the Angel's Peak, reached the Wells of Dee at 5 p.m., and the cairn of Braeriach at 5.30 p.m. Here our photographs were taken, and we congratulated ourselves, as our day's work was practically completed. The scramble down to the lower bothy in Glen Eunach (*sic*) was easily accomplished, we arriving there about 7 p.m., just as our waggonette was driving up. We had arranged that it should wait for us from 7 to 9 p.m., and so we actually finished up in accordance with our time-table. The

bath and dinner that were waiting for us at Aviemore were very much appreciated.

We had been nineteen hours on foot, with about three and a half hours of rests *en route*. As far as we can make out the distance covered was about thirty-eight miles, and the height climbed nearly eleven thousand feet. Of course we had two great points in our favour - long daylight, and perfect weather with no mist or wind. Then again the hills were all quite familiar to us, and we were in excellent training. It was a day that we shall remember all our lives with the pleasantest of memories.

Fifty Years Ago

As the 125th anniversary of the Club approaches, you may enjoy this account of the celebrations of the 75th anniversary!

From Volume XVII no. 93, 1968

The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Excursion

Two Members of Long Standing

The overnight excursion on June 23-24th 1962, marked the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the foundation of the Club at the Dairy-maid's Field by Loch Avon on June 23rd 1887. It was followed by a luncheon at the Fife Arms Hotel, Braemar, at which the future prosperity of the Club was toasted by a large company.

The idea was to walk over Cairngorm, 4,084 feet high at the last count, descend to the Shelter Stone, there to hold a Committee meeting at midnight, commemorating the Founding of the Club, and then to repair to Derry Lodge over Macdhui, or by way of Coire Etchachan if one boggled at the full combat course. There were 43 starters, many of them members of long standing, in whom hope had triumphed over experience. The hopes were not realised: well could we have done with the hot lunch of soup and boiled beef served on the summit of Cairngorm to the 31 members who attended the first meet in July 1889. Those were the days, when earth was nigher Heaven than now!

It was a popular meet, and various extra bodies, all of whom claimed to have booked but whose names could not be found on the official list, turned up to join the transport at Golden Square. The President has been known to be kind-hearted and on this occasion promised to take them as far as Queen's Cross, where the problem persisted. However, there were some absentees, and so, the problem resolved, the party set off for Glenmore, all in fine fettle, on a sunny summer Saturday. Some anxiety showed itself as we ran into low cloud and rain in the Glens of Foudland: it cleared as we reached Grantown for a successful tea, descended again at

Nethy Bridge, and by the time we set out from the Cairngorm car park for the midnight rendezvous at the Shelter Stone we knew the worst - at least we thought we did, which was perhaps fortunate! On a similar occasion in Glencoe, the kind-hearted President had exercised his discretion in favour of the comfort and well-being of the party, but had had some difficulty in living it down. This memory hardened his heart, and he said to himself "This is the 75th Anniversary Meet. To Hell with comfort, they will go and get wet this time!" And they did.

Although George Taylor had averred that he rarely encountered rain on Speyside, it was evident that, on this occasion, it was raining on both sides of the mountain, with hail and snow higher up and a gale to boot. Consequently, most aimed at reaching the Shelter Stone by the shortest route, by Coire Raibeirt, although one or two missed the way and, at least, may properly claim to have made an excursion. We, too, might have made an excursion but for Martin Nichols, who produced a compass, waved it vaguely in a south-easterly direction, and George said he thought that was about it and nobody could well disagree with a Speyside man, so we came into Coire Raibeirt without benefit of map. There doesn't seem to be much to this business of route-finding when one analyses it.

By the time Cairngorm summit was reached the President knew that all but one responsible party were ahead, and that weather conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that further contact would be unlikely. The story of the night from this point on is thus inevitably a personal one, but since it must be similar in design, if not in detail, to that of other groups, it is perhaps worth recording. It had its moments.

From Cairngorm, Bain, Ewen, Taylor, Nichols and party set off for Coire Raibeirt into the teeth of the blizzard and in gathering gloom, running at times in the hope of getting into at least comparative shelter in the shortest possible time. We sympathised with Martin Nichol's expression of parental anxiety on losing contact with his daughter; rather querulously he added: "She has the sandwiches". The only other memory here is of hurricane, hail, hurry and splash. Down Coire Raibeirt and along the shores of Loch Avon things were quieter, and it was possible to see through the murk that there were still vast quantities of snow in the upper reaches of the Feith Buidhe and Garbh Uisge Beag area. Mentally, but perhaps that was because of weather concussion, it seemed just a step now to the Shelter Stone. Some step!

As the open ground of the Dairymaid's Field was reached we met the full fury of the gale and continued progress became almost impossible. The President was brought to a standstill from time to time and Ewen, with water gushing out through the welts of his boots, kept charging up and down the bank of the rapidly rising Garbh Uisge in the purely

academic exercise of searching for stepping stones which had long before been completely submerged.

At the head of Loch Avon the wind blew furiously, great sheets of spray being lifted off the loch and the swollen Feith Buidhe tumbled as furiously through the snowfields over black rocks. The north face of Macdui, magnificent at any time, looked even more impressive in the midnight murk. I waited for Martin Nichols to acquaint him with the fact that wading the Feith Buidhe was inevitable, the Shelter Stone being on that side of the stream, as Euclid would say, remote from our station. Bain hardly glanced at the stream: "Heavens," he said, "my sweet peas will be taking a terrible battering."

The stretch up to the Shelter Stone provided the most exhausting effort of the night, but in due course, spurred on by the thought of sanctuary, food and drink, the rendezvous was reached. There were voices to the left, voices to the right, voices ahead. Every boulder in the area, it seemed, was sheltering someone, but there was no sanctuary. The Shelter Stone was full, very full. The President had intended to hold a Committee Meeting at the Stone, co-opting all those present for the occasion, but he couldn't get inside and the Secretary could not, or was unwilling to, be found. Somewhat later the Secretary was located in the Hutchison Memorial Hut, but it transpired that he had omitted to bring the Minute Book, so the whole idea had to be abandoned.

After a quick sandwich and coffee, off we went again, determined to be done with the affair at the earliest possible moment. As we climbed out of Glen Avon, Peter Howgate and party, out of Derry Lodge, hove in sight. It was difficult to understand why they should be laughing and gay, but that was the memory of the moment. From this point to Loch Etchachan is a featureless flat at any time, and there was a fair amount of water en route. Despite the help of a torch, visibility in the intense dark and driving rain was limited and Loch Etchachan was only located with certainty when Ewen went in a little deeper than usual.

As far as could be seen through the steam, the Hutchison Hut was fully occupied, so we pressed on as rapidly as our sodden clothes would allow, reaching the Derry Woods as the first grey light of dawn filtered in. It was just possible to make out a couple of tents in the woods. As we looked one flew away on a wisp of wind. It is regrettable, but we laughed our first laugh for a long time and hurried on regardless. Dry clothes, food and drink, a seat by a roaring fire, and Derry has never been so comfortable.

Sunday was bright again, all were safely back and it was once more a happy party of 60 or so who foregathered at the Fife Arms, where we were

glad to greet those who, unable to cross from Glenmore, had come from all around to be with us at lunch.

But, Mr Editor, although I know we waded the Feith Buidhe, that the meeting of Committee was cancelled, that we groped our way in mist and dark to Loch Etchachan and thence, at our best speed, to the Derry, as wet as I have ever been in my clothes. And although I remember that Bain produced a small Thermos flask, filled, I supposed, with hot coffee, the top of which he filled and handed to me, and which to my surprise was the authentic brew of Speyside which I had never seen carried in a Thermos before, for me the affair will always be associated less with those far events at the Dairymaid's Field than with that with that shattering *non sequitur* of near horticultural disaster at Milltimber: "Heavens, my sweet peas will be taking a terrible battering!"