

FROM THE SOURCE OF THE DEE TO THE SEA – My Duke of Edinburgh Challenge

JUDY M. MIDDLETON

“Please would you supervise a Silver Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) group for us?” That was my introduction to the joys of the DofE way back in 1996. I’ve been involved ever since. DofE is a National Youth Charity operating in the UK and internationally. So, when for the 60th anniversary year, they set a Diamond Challenge to raise funds to enable DofE to be delivered to an even wider variety of young people, especially in disadvantaged London and inner-City areas, I along with fellow DofE Club stalwarts Anne Pinches and Benn Hitchen began to toss around ideas for our own individual adventures.

DofE became a way of life for me when for many years, I ran the Award at Mearns Academy. I saw young people grow up through their Awards from Bronze to Gold, becoming confident, capable young adults with the ability to rise to life’s challenges.

I became a DofE Assessor some years ago, thinking ahead to when I no longer wanted to carry a heavy pack for four days supervising Gold Expeditions. I now assess Expeditions for Aberdeenshire, Girl Guiding Scotland and the Grampian and Cairngorm Network.

When many people think of DofE, the Expedition is all that comes to mind, not realising the very wide remit of the Award. In fact, there are another three sections which allow students to develop or improve on a New Skill, Physical Activity and Volunteer in their Community, and at Gold additionally complete a Residential Placement with other young people. All sections expand their horizons and help grow great young adults. At each level, Bronze, Silver and Gold, they spend increasingly more time to achieve their Awards.

Many readers will have met groups of young people in the hills carrying heavy rucksacks, with map cases hung about them; they are always easy to spot. The DofE Expedition section aims to inspire young people to develop initiative and a spirit of adventure. This gives them the opportunity to work in a team, learn to navigate, cook outdoors, practise camp craft and most importantly learn to be self-sufficient on a

journey as part of a team. They journey for two (Bronze), three (Silver) or four (Gold) days in the outdoor environment.

DofE is open to all young people aged 14 to 25 years. Many undertake DofE through schools or uniformed organisations, but it is also delivered by companies to their apprentices and in Young Offender institutions. It is open to all abilities, with the context varying depending on physical capability and those with learning difficulties.

DofE has taken me to amazing places both in the Cairngorms and further afield to Skye and the West Coast, and to places I probably wouldn't have ventured into otherwise, as although a few teams choose to climb hills, most journey through valleys and over passes. I have met many fantastic young people over the years, from privileged school groups to inner London Community Groups.

Trying to think of a suitable Diamond Challenge for myself wasn't easy. I had been challenged many times when working as an Outdoor Tutor! As I am not a natural "water person", I had, nonetheless, undergone training in white-water rafting, coasteering and high ropes. I eventually decided on journeying from "The Source of the River Dee to the Sea" as that would be a significant physical challenge for me.

I planned my Challenge to begin at the Wells of Dee. So, the route began with a cycle in to White Bridge, a walk in to the Garbh Coire Shelter, (leaving my overnight pack) and then a climb up the steep slopes of the Coire onto Braeriach and the Wells of Dee. I asked Ken Thomson for the best route to take, typically he underplayed it and said, "it's a bit steep in places"! From the Wells, I planned to bivi at the Shelter and walk and cycle out to the Linn of Dee. From there, I would cycle by various routes to Aberdeen and the mouth of the River Dee, following the river where I could. Back-up was to be provided by husband Robbie and my family.

August 21st, 2017 was a glorious day and accompanied by friend Kerstin Kramer we cycled in to White Bridge and wandered up towards the Lairig Ghru, turning off into the Garbh Coire and the shelter (see photograph on following page). Leaving our heavy items there, we commenced the long pull up onto the plateau. It got steeper, so our pace

slowed. The midges were out in their millions, but midge nets were not an option; as it became steeper, we needed to see where we were going! Arriving at the plateau, a light breeze kept the midges at bay and we were able to wander across the plateau and explore the area at leisure.

Garbh Coire Shelter



Kerstin Kramer

The Wells of Dee (see photograph opposite) are amazing, with so many springs bubbling up, producing small trickles and gradually all coming together to form the infant River Dee. We watched the river falling over the edge of the Coire and could see it way below us wending its way to the sea. It was a glorious day and the views were spectacular over to mighty Ben Macdhui, Cairn Toul and Angel's Peak.

Wells of Dee



Judy Middleton

Clambering down the Coire sides, I thought about Ken's comments! Once back at the shelter, we decided to cook our tea there despite the midges. The Garbh Coire Shelter did not look inviting as the door was hanging off and sadly the small building needs lots of work to make it watertight again. Two guys then appeared who planned to stay overnight. They magnanimously said we could have the bothy and they would bivi as there is only space for two. This made our minds up: we'd walk to Corrou Bothy.

The walk to Corrou was better than expected and joy of joys we had the Bothy to ourselves. It is quite luxurious now compared with the olden days as it is wood-lined with a porch and a toilet. An amazing man from the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA), Neil Reid, walks into the Bothy monthly to change the toilet bags: what a star he is.

Next day we headed back to White Bridge and our bikes and were soon at Linn of Dee where Robbie took our heavy packs from us. A short cycle to Braemar (see photograph on following page) for lunch (and shower!) and off to the Old Brig of Dee.

Upper Deeside



Robbie Middleton

Cycling through Ballochbuie Forest on Balmoral Estate is beautiful and eventually we came to the locked gates into the curtilage of the Castle. Slowly the gates opened, and Prince Edward drove through and waved to us. The policeman on the gate couldn't be persuaded to let us through to cycle the easy way: "*too much paperwork*"! So, it was uphill and round with a good run down to Easter Balmoral. The South Deeside Road took us past the flood-damaged base of Abergeldie Castle and to Ballater where we picked up the old railway line, now the Deeside Way. The old station was all boarded up after the fire, awaiting rebuilding.

Cycling on to Dinnet, past the damaged White Bridge at Cambus o'May, Kerstin left me there and I stayed overnight with a friend. Next day I rejoined the Deeside Way at Dinnet Station and had an easy cycle as far as Aboyne where the final section of the Way awaits completion. Picking up the Way later from Kincardine o'Neil to Potarch and a welcome coffee, it was uphill towards Shooting Greens, but I cut

through and down to the River again where I had to push my bike, as much of the track had sadly been washed out by the December 2016 floods. I rejoined the old railway line at Banchory and onwards passing the thriving Crathes Station and its trains. Further east I passed old stations and platforms with bits of road at Drumoak and Culter (with Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route disruption) and eventually arrived at the end of the Deeside Way at Duthie Park. Then I was amongst heavy traffic all the way through Aberdeen and the harbour, where the family met me, at the end of what had been for me a fascinating and challenging journey.

The experience of travelling the course of the Dee from bubbling springs, to frothing maturity and finally meandering sedateness was memorable, and recalled all the children and young people I have observed mature from chaotic exuberance to organised and competent hillwalkers.

All in all, a great experience and with lots of support from friends and family raising about £1,000 for DofE.

Garbh Coire



Sandy McIntosh