

## PAST PRESIDENTS' PARTY

THE EDITOR

The Sanskrit chant Om Sahana Vavatu is sometimes used before yoga practice to give thanks to teachers, predecessors and tradition. Whilst not suggesting that we begin all Club outings by intoning Gill, Judy, Richard, Ken, Ian, Eilidh, Anne, Adrian, James, Marjory, Garry and Om, Om, Om, Shanti, it is a cause of celebration that at the time of writing (February 2024) with Helen Russell as our New President, (see page 355) we have in our midst 11 Past Presidents (PP). To celebrate these keepers of sometimes forgotten and unrecorded Club history and culture and to probe for hidden gems, I suggested a "Past Presidents' Party" outing to Kerloch, south of Bridge of Feugh.



From L to R, Richard, Gill, Marj, Ken, Judy, Eilidh and Anne

Photo credit J Robinson

Despite a frankly grim and grey day, 7 PPs duly turned up on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, more or less on time and at the correct place. Due to location and circumstance Ian Bryce, James Friend and Adrian Scott sent apologies and at that time Garry remained active President. Busy social calendars and illness curtailed the walk for some resulting in the trio of Ken, Richard and Marj forging on to the summit. Afterwards we retired to the Feugh Falls Restaurant for coffee and cake. This occasion allowed for much "President's Parley", the

term coined by Richard for a gathering of PPs, some of which topics of conversation are gathered here.



Summit Cairn Kerloch

Photo credit J Robinson

Who knew for instance that as well as forging many a marriage, a Club outing in August 1992 was the scene of a wedding at Invermark Church with tea and cake at the Laurencekirk Hotel? Or that Muir hosted a BBQ for 300 following the 100<sup>th</sup> Club overnighter to Macdui, the Shelter Stone and Dairymaid's field. Did you know that in recognition of the work Jack Connell put into amalgamating local routes, that the MWWs have on occasion been dubbed "the Connells" or that the Club has run week long meets to Skye and Ireland? The President's Party ( designated for weekend Day Meets) it turns out is a fairly recent Club feature prompted by the 1971 Feith Buidhe disaster and given impetus by a Lochnagar meet where the anticipated party of 8 swelled to 26 some of whom were underprepared and under geared for potentially challenging conditions. Here is a quote from records of 1973 noting the tension between keeping outing participants safe whilst creating a friendly and welcoming environment for newcomers.

*The Secretary had circulated a set of outline proposals concerning safety on Club excursions. The background was that on more than one recent meet there had been present persons who were neither members nor guests of any member present, who were not entirely adequately equipped and whom no-one recognised as needing supervision and companionship; also, that even Associate members would on occasion be found without map or compass or to need supervision which was not readily forthcoming. The main feature of the*

*proposals was a suggestion that the Club should more clearly assume responsibility for training less experienced members by providing an instruction party on each excursion.*

*There ensued a general discussion, when the need for some steps along the lines proposed was generally, but not unanimously, accepted. It was agreed, though again not unanimously, that the Club should continue to allow prospective members to attend as quasi-guests if they did not know any member as whose guest they might attend, and that the Club should particularly ensure that such persons were not left unaccompanied by members. It was agreed that a book should be provided in which members might note their intended objectives and routes. Volunteers were found to lead parties such as had been proposed on the first two meets in 1973.*

Some, if not most of these Club anecdotes can be gleaned from our online archive but not everyone has the time or inclination to plough through the these and it is enlightening hearing the accounts from those who were there.

There follows some Past President "Paragraphs".

Gillian Shirreffs, President No 35, 1991 – 1994.

It is such a long time ago and yet my time as President of The Cairngorm Club remains a very clear and positive experience.

I was amazed and honoured to be asked by Eddie Martin, then President, if I would be willing to succeed him as President. I would be the third lady President in the Club History and the youngest at that time, however Richard and I had already been very active members for 20 years.

It was a time of a number of challenges and changes. Perhaps the most notable were the discussions concerning the formation of a new National Park in the Cairngorms. I was already familiar with what was happening both through the committee discussions and through Richard my husband being Club secretary and actively liaising with other clubs and organisations.

February of my first year saw us invited to a meeting in Braemar Village Hall with Magnus Magnusson in the Chair. This was to hear the proposals, to give evidence and to ask questions. It was a daunting prospect but Eddie and Richard both came with me and between us we were able to make submissions on behalf of the Club. The whole meeting was recorded I remember but Magnus Magnusson was an impressive and knowledgeable Chairman. When we adjourned for lunch at the Fife Arms, I realised I was the only woman there, and that came as a bit of a shock! Now we have the National Park.

Memories of internal Club affairs that I was pleased to be involved with include the decision to encourage more young members. This arose partly out of the fact that a few of us in the Club had family who were all friends with each other, shared a love of the hills and were in their mid to late teens. Some were keen on climbing so the committee agreed we should resurrect a Climbing group.

The committee also agreed to fund some young members to attend Glenmore Lodge for Winter Skills Training as well as more significant funding for those wanting to go further and obtain Mountain Leadership Training. More generally we also started Mountain First Aid courses for members, based at Muir.

It was a busy time especially my first year with a number of things coming up, but I really enjoyed it, and the bonus was having Maggie Gruer's very comfortable Chair to sit in!

Judy Middleton, President No 36, 1994-1997.

Little did I think on my first outing with the Club in 1965 with senior Club members Lesley Hay, Ralph Gerstenberg and Eddie Bothwell, that one day I would be asked to be President of the Club. The lesson learned that day was to learn to navigate for myself but that's another story! One of my main objectives as President, like Gill Shirreffs before me, was to ensure that new members were made to feel welcome and included and another aim was to encourage members to undergo training in climbing and mountaineering.

In the past, members had been encouraged to attend Winter Skills courses with MCofS (now MS). I knew however that some were unsure and may have preferred courses closer to home and so we brought in skilled MIC's like Di Gilbert to train folk locally at Muir Cottage, subsidised by the Club. First Aid and other courses were to follow. 1995, my first year in post, was hectic as I had some personal milestones to achieve. I completed my ML(S) Assessment in July and also had to complete my Munros (Ben lme). Luckily, I achieved both.

We all know that not all Overnigheters are amazing but 1995s was a memorable one. Leaving the bus in Glen Cluanie, we climbed up Sgurr nan Ceathramhnan to bivvy and woke to a stunningly beautiful cloud inversion. Coincidentally, the Quincentenary of the University of Aberdeen was celebrated that day by helping to have someone on top of every Munro. It was very hot traversing the Glen Affric Munros and a relief to eventually find water again. On arrival home, it was a quick turn round and off to assist with "The Three Blind Mice" "stravaiging" the hilltop boundaries of Grampian

Region before its demise. These three worthies from Gramian Society for the Blind (GSB) now North East Sensory Services (NESS) were all very visually impaired but were so impressive with their enthusiastic walking and camping skills and it was a privilege walk with them from Glenshee to Glen Feshie.

A highlight of 1996 was a Club holiday meet at Puerto Pollensa in Majorca and especially seeing (former) member Ian Lowit (then 80) atop Massanella, the highest climbable mountain on the island.

Club Dinners during my three-year Presidency, saw Irvine Butterfield, Seaton Baxter & Allen Fyffe giving excellent presentations. Luckily the days of long after dinner speeches are in the past, as is the formal dress code and one also needed thermals for the Elphinstone Hall in late November. I found it humbling and a great privilege to be your Club President, now nearly thirty years ago.

Richard Shirreffs, President No 37, 1997- 2000.

In 1972, when I had been a member for less than two years, and was still not an Ordinary Member, the President of the day, Sheila Murray, caught me in a weak moment (half asleep on the bus coming home from an overnight meet) and invited me “as an up-and-coming young member with office facilities” to consider taking on the Secretaryship. I accepted and was still Secretary 25 years later when the President of the day, Judy Middleton, told me that the committee wanted to have me as next President to see the Club into the new millennium. I might have had some choice on the first occasion, but I had no real choice on the second.

For my first year as President there was little out of the ordinary but come October 1998 Scottish Natural Heritage had issued a booklet on proposals for National Parks, with responses called for by the end of November – typical of the way so little time is allowed for consultation on important issues. We did have the Environmental Issues Sub-Committee discuss this and submit a response on behalf of the Club, but in April 1999 the committee minutes record “Nothing further was expected on the National Parks until the Scottish Parliament was up and running.”

Also, in October 1998 we began to think ahead to the millennium, wondering if we should have a special event such as a lavish meet, or might sponsor a new activity or a project, perhaps another environmental one. Robbie Middleton as Huts Custodian was forward thinking enough to reserve Muir for use only by members for the week when we would enter the new millennium.

By February 1999 our millennium plans were taking definite shape – an event at the Stag Ballroom at Mar Lodge at the end of March, a meet to Mount Keen in May with a photographer, and a £2000 contribution to the Clachnaben Trust for footpath work. The planning that went into these and the way that they panned out successfully is described in an article of mine “Marking the Millennium” in Issue 106 of the Journal.

One of my abiding memories from the event at the Stag Ballroom is looking in past a week before the event and finding “the floors awash with lengths of wood panelling, and WCs and wash hand basins arranged as an obstacle course over the dance floor”. But I was assured that it would be all right on the night, and so it proved to be.

Another fond memory relates to my speech at the 2000 Annual Dinner. Although I had just stood down as President at the AGM, I still had to propose the toast to the Club. IT at this time still had to make much of a mark on everyday life but it was clear that we were to expect great things to come. I suggested, half in jest, that very soon in the new millennium we might have goggles displaying the direction we were facing or even a map. And now? Well maybe not goggles with built-in displays, but car windscreens that show speed limits and other traffic information.

My three years as President certainly involved a lot of work, but I enjoyed them and am glad to have had the opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Club.

Ken Thomson, President No 38, 2000- 2003.

Looking back at the “Proceedings of the Club” section of the 2004 *Journal*, my time as President seems to have coincided with various significant changes of Office-Bearers - primarily the retirement of Graham Ewen as Bus Meets Secretary after 36 years, a record unlikely to be broken any time soon, although the current incumbent, Garry Wardrope, is making a good start! Nevertheless, due to falling numbers, a self-drive minibus, instead of a coach, was used for the first time in February 2003. A Constitutional change in 2003 was needed to recognise, in a new post, the importance of Club communications, both the longstanding Newsletter and the then-new-fangled Yahoo! email and website. In 2002, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (now Mountaineering Scotland) started to send out their magazine *Scottish Mountaineer*. Anne Cassidy took over from Les Batt as Club Secretary, both occupying this post for a few years before a more permanent replacement could be found - me!

An unusual task for me in 2002 was to work through about 8 boxes of glass slides dating from the early 1900s; these were eventually digitised. My last year as President was blighted by the avalanching of John Elgie in the Left-Hand Branch of the Black Spout of Lochnagar; I had to visit John in the ARI shortly before his death, and deal with enquiries from the membership and the media. On the hill, I remember a couple of snow-limited bus trips to, but not up, Glen Esk (on the return, the bus got stuck at Marykirk!), and in 2001 the then-regular Easter Meet at the (now demolished) Glen Affric Hotel at Cannich had to be curtailed due to foot-and-mouth disease, which also sabotaged (until 2003) a week-long Club meet to Wales.

Memorable meets during my Presidency included:

- Summer 2002: Joint with Westhill Walkers to Sierra Nevada in Spain, under the auspices of Brian Davey, with an ascent of Mulhacén, Spain's highest peak at 3,479m (11,414ft)
- Easter 2003: Aultguish Inn on the Ullapool road, mainly for Fred Belcher's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party, with wild boar for supper and a hired band afterwards, but also for several multi-Munro trips by other members, in marvellous weather!
- Summer 2003: after a week in the Ticino Alps with Lydia, to the Zermatt meet, held in memory of John Elgie; see above). I can't remember much (weather was poor, and the Matterhorn was falling down), but I did manage another "horn" or perhaps even two!

Eilidh Scobbie, President No 40, 2006-2009.

In thinking about the Cairngorm Club, I will echo the words of Sheila Murray, the Club's first Lady President, "joining the Cairngorm Club was the best thing I ever did." For me, it gave me the confidence and skills to do the things I enjoyed doing in the hills, it enabled many wee adventures both in Scotland and abroad, and over the years, it has provided me with many good friends. Hopefully, I will have put into the Club as much as I have taken out.

One particularly magic and never forgettable experience was my first outing with the Club - the overnigher on the Fannichs, perfect weather, with distant views even to the lighthouses of the Hebrides as the daylight failed, a full moon rising out of the mist over Loch Fannich, the hills a velvety black. I slept deeply that night and woke early when the sun started over heating my orange survival bag.

Anne Pinches, President No 41 2009-2012.

I was immensely proud to be elected President of the Cairngorm Club in 2009 and as the President's "Badge" was hung around my neck I felt as if I'd won Olympic Gold! I had been Vice-President previously and had thought that was a great honour but did not imagine that I could be President and here I was wearing the beautiful badge of office presented to the Club in 1976 by the First Lady President, Sheila Murray.

The job has its "duties" such as chairing meetings but outwith that the incumbent has freedom to make the job their own. Three years is a good length of time as I found it took the first year to grasp all that was involved and then I felt I could attempt to make my mark over the following two years. Quite a lot happened in the three years I was President. The Club was the subject of a television programme for Japanese TV which involved some filming at a weekend meet and also at the dinner in 2009. In 2012 we celebrated the 125th Anniversary of the founding of the Club with a well-attended BBQ at Muir Cottage.

My tenure coincided with continuing as Social Activities Secretary. One of the jobs of the Social Secretary is to organise the annual dinner. Acting on an idea suggested by Eilidh Scobbie in 2008 it was agreed that the Club should invite those who had been members for at least 60 years to the dinner. I hasten to add that the following year and since then, you only need to have been paying your sub for 50 years to enjoy a free dinner! As Social secretary I had the pleasure of inviting quite a number of longer standing members to the dinner. The members, some of whom had been members for almost 70 years, were invited by letter and I received some lovely letters in return, especially from those who were unable to travel to the dinner. For some, living elsewhere than Aberdeen, the distance to Aberdeen was the challenge, while others had mobility issues. All commented on how much the Club meant to them and many included meaningful memories. Some said that they very much enjoyed reading the newsletters and Journals and through that were able to share in others' adventures. Reading these letters made me realise that to be an active member of the Club didn't necessarily mean being able to get out and join in with a walk. Just to be taking a keen interest in the Club activities was enough for me.

During the 2009 dinner I was delighted as the President to present the certificates of long-standing membership. The certificate was conceived and designed by Derek Pinches, at that time the Treasurer and Membership secretary. That first year we were joined at the dinner by six members. Most



of those who couldn't come to the dinner were sent their certificate by post and Derek and I also delivered the certificate to some members who lived closer to Aberdeen. One gentleman, very pleased to receive his certificate, told us that he couldn't remember what he'd had for lunch that day, but he still had nightmares about Crowberry Ridge.

Throughout my time as President, I was ably assisted by my two Vice-Presidents, Derek Beverley and Marj Ewan who were by my side for my three-year stint and ready to support when necessary. I also had wonderful support from my husband Derek and my Mum who took a keen interest in what I was doing. I was delighted that one year she could join us for the Annual Dinner.



One of the privileges of being President was having custody of Maggie Gruer's chair, I very much enjoyed spending quiet moments sitting in it next to our Rayburn oil fired stove in the kitchen imagining her next to her peat fired Raeburn at Thistle Cottage Inverey

On reflection it was a wonderful fulfilling three years, and I still can't believe I was privileged enough to hold that position .

Maggie Gruer's seat with cushion embroidered by Pam Howgate Photo credit Helen Russell

James Friend President No 43, 2014 – 2017.

Although I became a President of the Cairngorm Club in 2018, I first joined the Club in 1984, though I had spent many years before this hillwalking with school and university friends from about 1952 onwards, and even did my first Munro (Lochnagar!) in 1947 when I was 9 years old. But my first outing with the Cairngorm Club was the annual January outing to Lochnagar, where I joined the then President's Party. However, such were the conditions that the road

up Glen Muick was blocked, and we went to Easter Crathie instead, to tackle Lochnagar from the north! But, as you will know, the O.S. map covering Lochnagar does not extend over the glens from the north, and it just happened that I had with me an old O.S. Tourist map of the Cairngorms, which did cover all that area! The leader of the Party jokingly said that I could mark my first outing with the Club by leading the President's Party as I was the only one with a suitable map! Of course, the route was simple enough and I cannot claim to have led the party, but it was memorable and good day, and I enjoyed the company and the experience! I remember at that time it was considered gentlemanly for male attenders to change out of their outdoor clothing behind the back of the bus, while the ladies had the privacy of changing inside the bus itself!

### **Marj Ewan, President No 44, 2017 – 2020.**

Having completed an 'Introduction to Rock Climbing' at Aberdeen College in the late 1990's I joined the Cairngorm Club to find someone to climb with, and it has become so much more than that over the years. I remember my first winter climb in Raeburn's Gully on Lochnagar which was also my first bus meet day with the club. We arrived 3 hours late back for the bus (which had gone!) and we got into quite a bit of trouble, but it was worth it. Don't recommend being late to others though. I completed my Munros and had climbed most of them during weekend meets, and being President was certainly an experience. I've made lifelong friends, had many adventures (and occasional epics) and especially enjoyed the climbing and trips abroad which were so much fun. Hopefully there is still much more to come.

Since Marj was President, we have had Garry Wardrope as President No 45, 2020 -2023 and now Helen Russell, our 46<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> female President. Indeed, one of the very positive aspects of our Club's organisation has been the ratio of female to male Presidents.

Although all of our PPs would argue that the vitality and evolution of the Club resides with members, Committee members and organisers it is clear from the above that behind the scenes a great deal of energy, passion, hard work and grind goes into the usually smooth running of the Club's organisation.



Back row, Anne Pinches, Eilidh Scobie, Judy Middleton, Gill Shirreffs  
Front Row, Sheila Murray, Anne Cordiner

So, the next time you are walking with a PP, keep an ear out for these nuggets of history and change and reflect on the effort of those who have step cut before us.