

## THE ROLE OF MID WEEK WALK (MWW) COORDINATOR THROUGH COVID AND BEYOND

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For many years I looked enviously at the Cairngorm Club calendar and wished that I could go on the midweek walks. The appeal of a local walk which meant that you didn't have to get up too early and arrived home in plenty of time for your tea was very attractive. However, teaching 5 days a week prevented this. It wasn't until I dropped from a full-time teaching commitment to part time that I was able to go along on my first midweek walk. On the evening before my first midweek walk, I wondered who might be there and if I would know anyone. But I was pleased to see a lot of familiar faces and to reconnect with some Cairngorm Club friends whom I hadn't seen for many years.

Right from the start I felt comfortable walking with this relaxed and friendly group and as I approached retirement, I was looking forward to the Thursday walks becoming a regular fixture in my schedule. At this time the Co-ordinator for the midweek walks was Marion White. I heard rumours that Marion, after coordinating the midweek walks for some years, was hoping to stand down in the near future. My good friend and, at the time, Club President, Marj Ewan, alluded to the fact that the Club might have difficulty finding someone to fill the position. If this was a hint that I might like to take the job on now that I had retired, I decided to ignore it. After all, I was far too busy enjoying my retirement- travelling to exotic destinations outwith the school holidays, meeting friends for lunch and not having to get up at 6.20am each morning. Then in June 2018 Eilidh Scobbie, Sue Miller, Marj Ewan and I went on a trip to Shetland. We set sail from Aberdeen on a gloriously, sunny evening heading north through (thankfully) calm water to Lerwick. I can't recall exactly how it happened but by the time we berthed early the next morning I had somehow agreed to be the Midweek Walks Co-ordinator and Eilidh had agreed to be the Social Secretary. All I can say is that there was definitely no alcohol involved.

In the event I did not officially start in the role until after the AGM in November 2019. This allowed me to have a handover from the outgoing post holder. Initially I worried that I did not have enough knowledge of local walks. What would happen if the Meets Organiser (M.O) was sick on the day? Would I be expected to step in at the last moment? This could be disastrous! Would there be enough people coming forward with walk suggestions for the next year's calendar? Or too many? In reality all my worries were unfounded. Amongst the group there are a host of seasoned and knowledgeable walkers who have ideas for walks in abundance.

One of my first jobs was to build the calendar for 2020. Fired up with enthusiasm I set up a meeting in the Grammar School FP club and invited along anyone who was interested. Being a typical, albeit retired, primary teacher I tried to be well prepared so turned up with a 2020 calendar on A3 paper, pens, post it notes, a map of the northeast made using pages out of an old road atlas, and a packet of Skittles (sweeties). There was method in my madness! Everyone scribbled their walk ideas on the post-it notes. Then we marked each walk location on the map using a Skittle. This was to ensure that over the course of the year we offered walks in a range of different locations. Once we had agreed on our 12 walks, we built up the programme by allocating each month a walk using the post-it notes. After a bit of negotiation and moving post-it notes around, we had come up with the programme for 2020. I was pleasantly relieved, and everyone went home after finishing off the skittles.

2020 dawned and things in the midweek walks were going to plan. There was a good attendance on the January walk, and no-one got lost or injured. It was during the February walk, a wonderful walk from Cruden Bay to Peterhead via the spectacular Bullers of Buchan ably organised by Ian Murray, that I heard the words Covid, and Corona virus in people's conversations. Sadly, before too long these words became part of our everyday vocabulary. Like most other people I thought that this was something that would happen to other people in another part of the world. I was wrong and Covid and a strict lockdown put paid to much of the 2020 midweek walking calendar. As time passed walking in groups became possible, although subject to restrictions. For a time, numbers on walks were capped and travelling limited, so City and Shire dwellers walked separately.

However, by October 2020 things were looking hopeful and for the rest of the year things went as planned. A programme for 2021 was planned in good faith. This time via emails rather than a face-to-face meeting – a system that worked remarkably well. But just as 2021 dawned we went into lockdown 2 and it wasn't until April 2021 that we had our first "normal" midweek walk of the year. This was a walk from Aboyne to the Bell Wood organised by Gill and Richard Shirreffs. It was a glorious Spring day. The sun shone, the birds sang and I'm sure that like me, the 20+ walkers who attended that day enjoyed the feeling of freedom and walking with friends again. Over the years, the Thursday walks have evolved from a walking group initiated by Gill Shirreffs for mothers of school aged children and the demography has shifted but the format remains broadly the same. Midweek walks: start no more than 1.5 hours' drive from Aberdeen, are around 7-8 miles in length and are shorter, lower and

closer to home at the start and end of the year Over time some traditions have grown up. The May walk is usually held out towards Braemar and coincides with the Club Work Weekend at Muir. Traditionally tea, coffee and home bakes are laid on at Muir Cottage after the walk and a band of dedicated midweek walkers always stay on at Muir to help give the Club Hut its annual make over.

As Covid restrictions were relaxed we were once again able to include a “bus meet” in the programme. The first post Covid bus meet was organised by Eilidh Scobbie in August 2022. A bus picked walkers up in either Aberdeen or Banchory and dropped them off at the carpark for Clachnaben. The group walked from there to Charr bothy. Here we had lunch and were joined by a representative from Scottish Woodlands Ltd, the project partners for Aviva, who came to talk about and answer questions on the woodland creation and peatland restoration planned for carbon capture in the area. From there we walked on to the Clatterin’ Brig Tearoom in Cairn O’Mount for tea and scones before the bus transported us home.

The 2024 calendar combines a walk with a Christmas lunch. If successful,

this too will become an annual event. What is notable is the amount of research and preparation the M.Os put into each walk. As well as checking out the route, often several times, M.Os prepare a write up about the walk which covers not only all the



essential details e.g. starting time, route and usually a map, but also includes any notable things of interest ( see above) that we might see en route such as a historical site or geographical feature. In addition, they do a “recce” of the nearest, suitable café, as the post-walk coffee, cake and chat is an important feature of the midweek walks. If I was asked to choose a favourite midweek walk, I would struggle as they are all memorable and enjoyable in their own

way. However, this 2023's April walk to the summit of The Coyles of Muick is memorable. In the weeks leading up to the walk there was some online discussion between Club members about the Meall Dubh Howff on the Coyles of Muick. This was a revelation to me as I had already reccied the walk 3 times and never set eyes on it! In addition, a Google search on the Coyles of Muick revealed that there was a GEOCACHE named "Danish Affair" hidden just below the summit. (For those who haven't heard of Geocaching, it is a kind of global treasure hunt. Seekers use a GPS and a grid reference to find a hidden cache. The "treasure" is not gold or silver coins but small, rather inconsequential tokens such as a keyring. The idea being that if you find the cache, you take something out and add something new.) Fired up with enthusiasm I set off determined to find both. As it turned out I managed to locate the Meall Dubh howff relatively easily thanks to Mike Duguid's very clear instructions. The small stone structure, which if you know where to look can easily be seen from the path, has room for about 4 people and there is a visitors' book in a plastic box which makes interesting reading. Finding the Geocache, even with my G.P.S proved to be more challenging. For nearly 30 minutes I scoured the area below the summit, and just as I was about to admit defeat miraculously found it. I added my own "treasure" to the box and carefully returned it to the exact spot before heading for home. The next week on the midweek walk we all visited the Meall Dubh howff and then a small, but enthusiastic, group set off to find the prize in the Geocache box. While the rest of us enjoyed lunch at the summit cairn the group, armed with G.P.S , a grid reference and tenacity searched the area below us. Just as we were finishing off our sandwiches the triumphant party joined us with their newly found treasure- a Cairngorm Club badge! Well done Kate Brockman who located the Geocache box.

While it's true that I took on the job of midweek walk co-ordinator somewhat reluctantly I have grown to enjoy the role. While I was busy bagging Munros I ignored what was on my doorstep. Thanks to the midweek walks my knowledge and appreciation of local walks (and cafes) has broadened and improved. I now no longer worry about trying to build the next year's programme or what will happen if, at the last minute, a M.O can't be there for their walk, as there is always someone willing to step in and help out. Finally, I would like to say a big thank you to all those who organise and attend the walks. New faces are always warmly welcomed and many of us enjoy the opportunity to catch up with friends while exploring this corner of the north east. Hope to see you on the next one!