



# **THE CAIRNGORM CLUB JOURNAL - Number 116 2026**

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**Cover photo:**  
**Looking east over the col between**  
**Stob Coire nan Lochan and Bidean nam Bian**  
**(Vay Mutch)**

*All images in this journal have been  
supplied by the relevant article authors*

# The Cairngorm Club Journal 2026 - Number 116

Edited by Mark A Norris

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## Editorial

I am delighted to have taken on the role of Editor of the Journal from Jean Robinson, who has done a sterling job over the last 4 years covering the extensive activities and interests of the Club.

It is with genuine pleasure that I take on the role, and a privilege to be able to hear and share the diverse stories of members and friends from across the world of hill walking, climbing and outdoor adventure.

In this issue we have articles covering a wide spectrum of interest - climbing 'epics', fascinating memories and histories, insights to the Cairngorms and their hidden places, European mountain experiences, and stories from other special areas of Scotland.

And of course there are some beautiful photographs throughout, which remind us of the joy of being in the great outdoors.

I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Norris, March 2026

Email: [journal@cairngormclub.org.uk](mailto:journal@cairngormclub.org.uk)

## The Greater Traverse - a Skye Epic

by Peter Henry

Back in 2021 I made the trip to Skye for an attempt at the Greater Traverse. For the uninitiated, the Greater Traverse takes in the standard Cuillin Traverse, a superb challenge in itself, before crossing Glen Sligachan and continuing the traverse along to Bla Bheinn. UKC informs that this is a 20 mile route with over 4000m of climbing, but the numbers don't do it justice. I've also found it described as being 'strictly for masochistic whippets', which feels closer to the mark!

With this being a one-day solo mission, logistics determined that a start and finish at the Bla Bheinn car park would be best, with an approach by sea... what adventure!



The day started with a cycle along the pretty, but surprisingly hilly, road to Elgol to catch the 9am Misty Isle boat out to Loch Coruisk. The trip is aimed at sightseers and dutifully

slowed down to circle what seemed to be every rock in the bay to give us a good look at various seals, gulls and what not. This was interesting at first but having seen one seal, I wasn't in the mood to hang around so we could view and photograph a few dozen more, I was impatient to get on the hill! Soon enough, however, we were ashore, and my restlessness eased as I began the long trudge up to the first peak on the ridge, Gars-bheinn, which afforded wonderful sunny views in all directions. It was all set to be a glorious blue Skye day! To the north my objective stretched out before me, an unending line of ridges and spires as far as the eye could see, a daunting prospect!

Good progress was made over Sgurr Nan Eag before picking up the devious wee shortcut out to the outlying Sgurr Dubh Mor. The diversion out to this rough peak is a bit of a time suck and, while not strictly on the main ridge, it is afforded Munro status and so its omission would feel odd. Next up was Sgurr Alasdair, another peak off to the side of the main ridge line, though less of a diversion this time. The summit marked the topographical high point of the route, it was all downhill from here!

The King's Chimney loomed large up ahead, an impressive sight taking a slightly intimidating looking line directly up the southern face of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich but, thankfully, it's much easier than it looks with generous holds, good feet, solid rock and big exposure. Soon enough I was over the summit and heading for the obligatory scramble of An Stac, another impressive looking line that is much easier tackled than it first appears.



The Inaccessible Pinnacle was reached in good time. However, my late start would come back to bite me as it was now rush hour, and it was particularly busy on this day. A spell of wet weather in the preceding days ensured that pretty much everyone on Skye seemed to be attempting to climb it at the same time. A mumbled greeting to those waiting patiently at the base for their turn and I pulled on. Thankfully, folk seemed happy for me to climb past/over them on their way up the east ridge... or at least nobody complained!

When I got to the top, however, there were teams on all routes that might be used to descend; there was even a party on the VS on the south face. I was trapped so took the opportunity to catch my breath, grab a snack and take in the views. During those Covid sensitive times, however, my presence added to an already growing problem on the Pinn: one guide was bringing two ladies up the east ridge, another was bringing a couple of old boys up the west face and there was another couple on top, just minding their own business. When the clients started arriving it all got rather crowded on our wee perch and the guides started having a "debate" about social distancing, remember those days?

I mused on the ethics of our situation; whose ascent took precedence? The punters who had paid a lot of money for the experience of a lifetime? The guides who were out here making a living? The average Joes who had patiently waited their turn in the queue? Who had the most right to be there? Clearly not me! Irrate-guide shot me a glare and I distinctly overheard 'and what's he doing here?!' Mellow-guide sparked up a conversation with me and offered to lower me off when a rope became

free. While not my preference, given the circumstances it seemed a pragmatic solution. Sometime later a rope became free, I wedged myself with a sling, stepped off the top and was soon down on terra firma, giving



a friendly wave and getting the hell outta there!! Steady progress resumed on the long gentle scree stomp over Sgurr na Banachdaich and Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh before a quick pitstop (an apple, the last proper food in my pack) prior to tackling what is probably my favourite part of the ridge: Sgurr a Mhadaidh to Sgurr na Bairnich. With no

Munro tops en-route, this is probably the least frequented section of the ridge, however there's intricate and sustained scrambling on this section and route finding can be quite tricky. Thankfully previous exploration allowed me to relax and enjoy it, and enjoy it I certainly did. There are basalt staircases, wonderfully subtle downclimbs, exposed slabs, knife edged ridges and some deep crevasses to be jumped.... in short, there's so much fun to be had here!

Next up was the long slog up Bruach na Frithe. This feels like the longest climb on the ridge and isn't all that interesting, however I took the scrambliest lines possible, ticked off the two tops and soon reached the foot of Am Bastier, with the imposing Bastier Tooth looming large above. The plan was to follow Naismith's Route up onto the tooth but there was a party already ensconced. I was secretly relieved. Although not technically difficult, with huge exposure and some rattly holds, soloing Naismith's is not something to be taken lightly... and I was feart! I slinked down onto the Lota Corrie Route instead. Whilst this is an easier option (sort of?), there is much loose scree to contend with. Two steps up, one-point-five steps down, thighs burning. Soon enough, however, I was up onto the tooth and looking forward to the West Ridge of Sgurr nan Gilleann, the finest peak on the ridge.

I summited 6 hours 15 minutes after leaving Gars-Bheinn, a smidge slower than planned, but feeling strong and ready to take on the next part

of the route: the 900m descent down into Glen Sligachan and re-ascent up the other side! On the summit were a couple of chaps who had just finished their ridge traverse. I accompanied them down the East Ridge before they headed off north to Sligachan for a well-earned pint. For me it was south over Sgurr Beag to the final peak of the main ridge, Sgurr na h-Uamha.

As the natural end point of the main ridge it is slightly curious that it receives less acclaim than its southern cousin Gars-Beinn. Positioned at the end of a long day however, with the pub in the opposite direction, I suppose this is to be expected.

It's a shame though as it's a great wee summit with some interesting scrambling and offers a unique, Tolkienesque view back towards Sgurr nan Gilleann.

At this point all was going swimmingly; however, things were about to take a turn for the worse...



While descending off Sgurr na h-Uamha I was lowering myself down onto a ledge when a large block came away in my hands, bounced at my feet and tumbled off down the hillside, "That was lucky"! I took a moment to compose myself then noticed a strange wet feeling in my right shoe. My foot started to throb. I stood up and weighted it, a sharp pain shot over my foot and up my leg. It hadn't missed after all. Bugger.

With hindsight, I had badly bruised the top of my foot and broken my wee toe. At the time, it was just sore. Thankfully it had been a glancing blow, if it had landed square-on I'm not sure I would've had much of a foot left!

I sat back down to consider my options.

1. Call for help. I was in a remote area, on my own, late in the day, in shorts, t-shirt and trainers, nothing in my bag but an ultra-light excuse for a jacket, an empty water bottle and a small handful of trail mix which I couldn't force down. I had gotten myself into a rather foolish predicament. I'd heard stories of other such

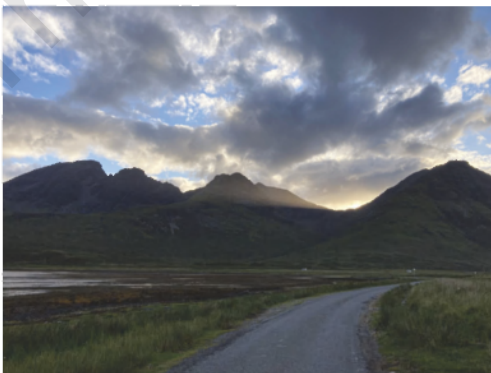
misadventure in the news and tutted, it was the kind of behaviour folk frown upon. Call for help? Not a chance!

2. Re-ascend the east ridge and walk out to Sligachan. Tempting, but then what? It's a long way out and it would leave me a very, very long way away from the car... late at night... and taxis are expensive. Not liking that idea either.
3. Suck it up and keep going. The only choice, surely!?

I cinched my laces up as tight as they would go and gingerly weighted the foot, ouch, but then noticed that if I stood the inside of my heel, toes up in the air, it wasn't too bad. I could work with that.

I'll admit the bum-slide descent down to the glen and hobble back up the other side was a little attritional and there may have been a teary tantrum when I fell into a bog in the middle, but slowly, progress was made. This should have been the fastest and most runnable part of the whole route but here I was limping along on my heel, crabbing up the hills, randomly falling over from time to time, cursing my luck all the way... masochistic whippet indeed!

Eventually the ridge line was reached and my mood improved. It was a fine evening, there were scraps of path to follow and the going was a little easier for a while as I speed-limped along toward the next obstacle: the Clach Glas - Bla Bheinn traverse. I had been concerned about how I would cope on more technical terrain, but found that scrambling was actually easier than walking. The slower pace and more precise nature of moving over rock helped and there was less clipping things with my foot and stumbling over.



The Clach Glas traverse really is something special and cannot be recommended highly enough. The scrambling is sustained and at times exposed but is never difficult. There are so many brilliant parts to this traverse: the summit slabs, the Imposter, the chimney onto Bla Bheinn... I didn't want it to

end! The quality of the scrambling, along with the distraction of Scotland giving England a 0-0 thrashing blaring out of my phone's wee speakers, ensured that I all but forgot about my foot for a while.

All too soon the summit of Bla Bheinn was reached in the gathering gloom, 11 hours 15 minutes after leaving Gars-bheinn, a bit later than anticipated and a little worse for wear but feeling chuffed to have overcome adversity and made it to the finish in good spirits.

All that was left was to descend the rough, steep, loose tourist path in the dark... quite the ordeal! It was the home straight, however, and back at the car awaited a pre-placed midnight feast and a cool beer. What. A. Day.

## **An Italian/Scots Love Story**

by Arianna Lombardi and Mauro Maraschi

We are Arianna and Mauro, and this is a short story about how two Italians raised in the Alps fell in love with Scotland.

Our first encounter with the Cairngorms happened almost by chance. It was 2018, and we had left home for a two-month road trip heading north.

We chose our first hike in Scotland after reading about the Am Fear Liath Mòr (the Big Grey Man) who haunts the country's second highest peak - Ben Macdui. Having got to the Cairngorms, as we started our hike up the mountain in the morning haze, a majestic stag was standing in front of us on the top of the hill - we could not have wished for better! When we reached the summit, all around us was nothing but wild land waiting to be explored - very different compared to the Alps. We dropped a pin on the map and said to ourselves: we will come back!

Years later, during our Skye Trail adventure, with crisps and beers in our hands at the Sligachan pub, we met Mark - the current editor of this Journal - who was there for one of his "Adventures on the Black Cuillin" that he wrote about in a previous issue. Chatting together he invited us to stay at his place, and the following year, he and his wife Fay hosted us at their home right on the borders of the Cairngorms National Park! It felt like the final piece of a puzzle. The Cairngorms were still in our minds, and we couldn't wait to come back!

We spent a few days exploring Aberdeenshire with Mark who led us hiking, climbing on a cliff by the sea, visiting an amazing cheese factory at Cambus o'May, spending amazing evenings all together at their place with music and whisky, and chatting and enjoying the fire!

Then we moved to Aviemore where Enrico, our dear friend, joined us and we finally had the chance to do the Cairngorms traverse we had been planning for a long time! The plan was to go up to Ben Macdui, but a very *blawie* day forced us to change our route. We started from Glenmore and walked through the Ryvoan Pass to the bothy where a golden eagle appeared as if it was showing us the way.

We kept going, following the Lairig an Laoigh, through a dramatic landscape that became wider and wilder at every step. The Fords of Avon shelter appeared and we turned right following the River Avon and found the perfect spot for our tents on its banks. The wind gave us a break at dusk, just in time to enjoy our dinner outside!

We were awake before the world began to dawn around us, and after a hearty breakfast we walked to Loch Avon where its astonishing vista opened before us.



The path then led us to Loch Etchachan, a perfect place for a lunch-break and for gazing at the summits, still dusted with the last of the winter snow, before going down beneath Coire Etchachan and reaching Glen Derry. It felt like stepping into a time machine: if a dinosaur had poked its head out of the Caledonian pine forest, it wouldn't have looked out of place!

At Bob Scott's we met one of the estate rangers. He checked if we were cooking properly — no campfires — and, seeing our Jetboil, tempted us with the promise of a huge breakfast in Braemar if we made it there before 12 pm. Needless to say, our goal in the morning became to arrive on time at The Bothy for our well deserved breakfast — and we did it!

We resumed our hike towards Loch Callater on a cold afternoon with low clouds, but the atmosphere was incredibly evocative. To add to the atmosphere, we were surrounded by the calls of black grouse and their whirring wings when they took flight as we walked. That evening, we witnessed a stunning sunset with the mountains reflected in the loch. As the sun sank below the horizon, the entire landscape gradually turned a deep blue.



Next day the start of the climb to Càrn an t-Sagairt Mòr felt like a treasure hunt. Mountain hares and ptarmigans stared at us curiously as we searched for another wing or an engine piece scattered over the top, from the plane crash of the late 1950s. We continued towards Càrn an t-Sagairt Beag and Càrn a' Choire Bhòidheach, then made a panoramic stop at The Stuic to admire Coire Lochan nan Eun still covered in snow. Then we had to rush to Cac Carn Mòr and Cac Carn Beag because big clouds were moving in our direction! We just had time for a quick lunch and a cup of coffee on the summit before rain and low visibility forced us to go down without even seeing Lochanagar.

We arrived at the Glas-allt-Shiel bothy, where the warmth of the fireplace was a fitting end to a cold and wet day.

Although the bothy looked like a tempting shelter, we pitched our tents facing Loch Muick and let the waterfall lull us to sleep into the night.

Only the final stretch to Ballater remained and just like years ago a large herd of red deer greeted us along the way. Our backpacks facing the mountains, as if to say goodbye — or maybe see you soon!



The day was cold, and upon our arrival in Ballater we treated ourselves to a large, sweet hot chocolate – with marshmallows and whipped cream, of course!

It's hard to describe, but when we're in Scotland we feel a strong sense of freedom and serenity, as if time slows down.

We feel at home among these wild and majestic mountains.

We had come full circle. But as you know, a circle has neither beginning nor end — and somehow we, two *figli delle Alpi*, keep getting called back into Scotland's slow, ancient rhythm.

Ariana's and Mauro's website can be found at [alplanders.com](http://alplanders.com).

## **The Hare and the Tortoise**

by Marcus Risdell

My plan to leave London after 28 years had been fraught with anxious moments, all the more so due to the pandemic and lock-down. With most of my belongings left behind in storage, I returned the key for my home of many years and boarded the train to Scotland. The cottage I was to share on the farm on the Black Isle was idyllic but cold in mid-February. Another volunteer was already in residence and huddled around the stove, we chatted late into the night. I was looking forward to some hard work in the fields.

We were planting willows, the going tough as we dug into the still frozen ground. Despite the exhilaration of gulping in the cold, clean air, I had a nagging pain in my abdomen. At the end of my first week I was rushed into Raigmore hospital and had my burst appendix removed! I was there for ten days.

As I slowly regained strength the nurses encouraged me onto my feet and I began to explore more of the hospital. By the lifts I found a large window overlooking Inverness and there to my surprise was this massive snow-covered mountain, glowing red in the sunset. Captivated by the spectacle I gazed on until forced back to the warmth of my bed in the ward. The map on my phone told me it was Ben Wyvis. On its north side is Loch nan Druidean. These names held magic in my imagination and I knew then that as soon as I could, I would climb the mountain and camp by the side of the loch.

Discharged and back in front of the stove in the cottage on the Black Isle, I realised my healing was only just beginning. The pain was not too bad, but any swift movement jiggled all my bits around inside. I was bloated and had to hold up my trousers with a bit of old rope. A short stroll to visit new neighbours, the sheep and the cows, left me exhausted: I had to rebuild myself, and I needed to eat. Oh, how I needed to eat!

I set myself the task of walking a little further each day. After two weeks I made it as far as the A9 and the man that sold goose eggs. Another week and I was on top of Ord Hill, all 191 meters of hard-won ascent: hill fitness must be stored in the appendix. And there in the distance was Ben Wyvis again, still a glorious white above the dreary browns of the moors. As my

explorations of the Black Isle became more ambitious, I began to appreciate how the mountain unexpectedly pops up here and there as you pass over the crown of a hill or reach a clearing in the woods. I visited ruined neolithic tombs and Pictish hillforts. Here I felt a deep sense of awe



that the ancients must have known as the mysterious massif, shining white in its winter blanket, floated in and out of their landscape. Indeed, its name derives from the Gaelic *fuathais*, with its meaning of terror, dismal and gloom. Yet it also carries another meaning of great quantity or size, just as does the English word awesome. It is sometimes likened to a beached whale, but I feel that does it an injustice. I saw it as a massive mountain hare, ears tucked in and curled up in its form in the heather.

In April I returned to work on the farm. Organic soil requires a lot of weeding, but bending over still caused a lot of pain in my still tender belly. I preferred to volunteer for all the heavy jobs, the shovelling, digging and turning the compost, as this made me feel stronger. May was approaching and the days lengthening. Lock-down restrictions were being eased. I pulled out my big pack; it was time to go for it and begin the ascent to Ben Wyvis.

My choice of a high camp at Loch nan Druidean was fortuitous: public transport options suggested a start from Evanton in the east. My route would be broken into stages which could be easily reversed should I find my body or my stamina were not yet ready. I was even concerned that the hip belt of my pack, heavy with winter gear, would irritate my scar tissue and make the journey impossible. This would be tested on the first stage, a shortcut struggling over the broken ground and stumps of a cleared plantation and onto the bus stop at Tore roundabout.

I couldn't resist including a quick visit to the chambered cairn at Drum Mor and the Black Rock Gorge of Harry Potter fame. It's a long old plod up Glen Glass to the road end at Eileanach Lodge, but that suited me fine, as did the lochside track to the incongruous Tudor revival Wyvis Lodge. It felt like a long time since I'd been in big boots and my feet dragged heavy, but other than this I felt fabulous as I turned up the stalker's path to Carn Gorm. To reach my camp at the upper Loch I had to struggle through thick heather and clamber over deep peat hags, tricky with a big pack at the best of times, and I remained mindful of my condition. The ridge of Glas Leathad Beag gleamed white across the water with old snow piled deeply



in hollows round the corrie. I got the tent up for an early night.

Sleep came fitfully. Snug in my winter bag I had fulfilled one part of the challenge I had set myself in the hospital just ten weeks before. Perhaps that was enough, and in the morning I should descend? Then it started to snow. Every now and then I had to whack the sides of the tent to stop them folding in on me. I found the sound of fluttering flakes and swoosh of snow as it sougled off the fabric soothing and drifted away into dreams full of druids and stone circles. Before I knew it, it was dawn. Loch nan Druidean was like a mirror and everything was white, light flurries adding to the beauty of the scene rather than showing malice. I decided to go on.

It was as the path disappeared under the ever-deepening snow that I met the tracks. The mountain hare had bounded straight up the cone of Tom a' Chònich, leaving distinctive footprints in the now deepening snow, its forepaws seemingly behind its rear.



The steepening slope forced me into a staggered zig zag and I could only marvel at the speed and agility as it had raced up the slope.

My progress may have been that of a tortoise, but I felt so alive. Despite the unusual exertion required I was at peace with myself, my mind, my body, and the mountain. It all made perfect sense. I would climb Tom a' Chònich and then make a decision about continuing to the higher summit on Ben Wyvis, Glas Leathad Mòr. Deep down I believed the hare had already made the decision for me.

After parting company with the tracks, the snow lay undisturbed across the bealach separating the two peaks. I was now alone in a pristine snowscape, with gentle flurries flitting around my face, melting on my tongue as I struggled to regain my breath. The hare's excellent adaptation to this winter mountain-scape inspired me and the lure of Ben Wyvis called me on. Over to the east, brooding beneath a glowering grey cloud

ceiling, mothballed rigs lay moored in the Cromarty Firth. These dark hulking sea-monsters jutted abruptly into the sky, potent symbols of our thirst for oil and the race to destroy our world. Such a contrast from the pure soft curves of the summit plateau ahead, a seemingly pristine home for the mountain hare. But this too has been tainted. Already global warming is stripping away the snows, leaving the hare naked and vulnerable in its white winter coat. How many aeons will it take for the hare to adapt to the destruction we have caused in such a short time since our industrial revolution.

Lost in my thoughts as I plodded through the snow. I disappeared into a heavy snow squall with a brief white-out. One last test. I took a hasty bearing on the trig point and panting from the exertion arrived at the summit just minutes before midday on the first of May.



I wish I could have lingered longer, but I still had a way to go. I was tired and needed one more camp by Loch Glass before my bus home from Evanton. My journey to full health and hill fitness was still a long way from being over. It had taken me three days to climb a mountain that most people easily summit in a day. But what a momentous little expedition it had been. It was as if the hare and the mountain had invited me to become part of them.

I've now moved on from the farm and the Black Isle, starting out on a new life in Inverness. Every time I cross the River Ness I glance over to "The Ben" as they affectionately call it round here. I smile and the mountain pricks up its ears and smiles back.

The Cairngorm Club

## **The Mountain Bothy - a changing world?**

by Neil Reid

It's been raining for hours. Everything you wear is saturated and there's a sodden dullness about your brain as you trudge on, failing to react when the rain gets heavier or even lessens. When you reach the river you don't hesitate before committing yourself to a knee-deep or more crossing: you'll get no wetter.

There's the bothy now. Last time you were there – some years ago right enough – it was a cold, damp hole of a place with no fire, and you expect no more now. You'll be out of the rain though and just maybe that drybag has kept your spare clothes dry. Oh, how good that would be!

But as you approach you smell smoke. Smoke? You burst through the door with unintended drama as your rucksack catches on the doorframe and suddenly releases, and then you're in the middle of the room with people in chairs all around you and... oh glory be! A fire! A good one too – you can feel the warmth even though your sodden clothes.

"Want a cuppa tea, pal? It's grim out there."

Not long after you're ensconced in a chair by the fire with dry clothes on and a mug of tea in your hands, listening to how the bothy was renovated a couple of years back and now has a fire and sleeping platforms, and even a toilet. As the evening wears on you'll get round to comparing hill tales and searching out mutual acquaintances. Maybe a dram or two as well. Bothy life – nothing like it!

It's a scenario familiar to many reading this, particularly when in the Cairngorms, where the last two decades have seen a real renaissance in the standard of what used to be a set of pretty spartan bothies (The pre-2012 Hutchie Hut compared to today, anyone?). But it's an experience that's maybe not as universal as we like to think. Because, for every happy hiker cosying up to the fire in a Cairngorm bothy, there are several others eschewing the geographical limitations of a bricks and mortar doss for the go-where-you-will freedoms of canvas. Because it's not canvas any more, it's some nylon stuff far lighter and more waterproof than canvas ever was, so you can carry it and camp wherever you like: at the foot of tomorrow's rock climb, for a lochside idyll (forgetting the midges), or even for a summit camp.

And it's not just geographical convenience. Lots of folk pick a camping spot right beside a bothy – even one without a toilet. Perhaps it's for the comfort of company, illusory though it may be. You might not interact with any bothy dwellers or fellow campers, but it's nice to know they're there. Even if there's not another soul camped there, nor anyone in the bothy, you somehow feel less alone beside some sort of human artifact. Or maybe I read too much into it; maybe it's just that most bothies have some flat grassy ground around them, which is easier for a tent than lank heather.

In any case, that's a lot of folk not using bothies. To be fair they're maybe enjoying the lack of snoring, and the cumulative aroma of a dozen pairs of sweaty, peat-caked socks can be a hard sell for some. But surely it's worth it for the craic; for the simple pleasures of meeting and talking with others not just from other walks of life but from all parts of the world; for the exchange of ideas, the sharing of culture, the satisfaction of retelling all your favourite escapades to new people who aren't as fed-up hearing them as your friends are. Bothies are one of the few contexts where it's not just acceptable but expected to engage with complete strangers with a degree of openness usually only shown with close acquaintances. And as well as the social interaction you also have the convenience of being able to cook your dinner on a table, or at least a level floor, rather than wobbling on tussocky grass or heather; and when it rains all evening, instead of lying in a damp tent wishing you had brought a change of clothes, you can sit on a chair in front of the fire watching the flames and seeing your wet kit drying out.

Should we worry about people not using bothies? After all, it does leave more room there for all those who enjoy the craic and convenience. But it's not that simple.

Most of those who currently look after the Cairngorm bothies are people who have used them themselves, often for decades, before deciding to do their bit and look after them for future generations.

But if there are no future generations? What if all these people in tents never develop the love for bothies and feeling for bothy culture that so many in my generation took for granted? What if there's not enough people who have that attachment and feel strongly enough about bothies to physically look after them? Will bothies turn out to be just a temporary

phenomenon that filled in the period between people going to the hills for recreation and the development of (relatively) cheap lightweight tents?

Do I believe that myself? Sometimes in darker moments it is a fear: the only regulars I see at bothies these days tend to be my age and older – and my days of being mistaken for a spring chicken are long gone.

But I'm not without hope. When I recently had to advertise for a new joint maintenance organiser to help me at Corrour Bothy the one serious candidate was a youngster of just 28 years. And she's proven over the last year to be not just capable, but utterly dedicated and ridiculously keen. So maybe the future is secure. Maybe there's a younger generation of mountaineers and hillgoers just waiting in the wings for the old farts to die off and give them space.

I'd like to think so, if only for the sake of that younger generation and the sense of fulfilment and achievement that's there for them.

Some years ago I thought about why I devoted so much time to caring for bothies, and wrote this down, which I don't think I could better now.

"So why do I bother?"

"Lots of reasons really. Sometimes I tell people it's because I've used the bothies all my life and it's about time I 'put something back'. Corrour was, after all, where more than half a century ago my father introduced me to that unique Scottish bothy culture where every man was your neighbour and no-one was left needing. So that's true, maybe. Pride, certainly: pride that I, a wee bauchle who knew this iconic bothy when it was four bare walls, a roof and an earthen floor, have been able to help others more skilled than I to turn it into an exemplar of modern bothy culture and am entrusted to help look after it."

"It's for the craic, too. The craic and the company, for they're a rare gang of folk who use and who look after the bothies – like-minded hill gangrels with years of experience and tales to tell and share – and the Cairngorms crew are the best of all."

"The gratitude of my fellow hill walkers and climbers is nice too. It would be a lie to say I'm not chuffed when someone says well done, when people who have enjoyed a night's comfortable shelter and perhaps a dram and a tale or two around the fire say thanks for all the good work."

"But, at heart, it's because it is a chance, however small, to make a difference. By walking a few miles into the hills I love and doing a few hours of work, I can make a small part of the world a better place than it was. For the very existence of a bothy is a defiant subversion of the dog-eat-dog world of business and politics. Maintaining a place of refuge and shelter in the wilderness, open and free for all people to come together as strangers and share each other's company as friends, to help one-another and share tales and experiences, is a proud assertion and reminder of humanity in a world where humanity too often seems in danger of being overwhelmed by fear and greed."

"To be able to help in work like that is a privilege and a gift. How could anyone say no?"

So. What are you doing this weekend?

## **A Bobby on Ben Macdhui**

by Isobel Bannerman

When I read in the Cairngorm Club Mailing that the Club were looking for contributions to help fund the cost of the replacement Ben Macdhui indicator, it dawned on me that it would be a nice gesture for Dad, John Duff, in his twilight years, to contribute once more to a project in his beloved Cairngorms – they were so much a part of his active life.

Ben Macdhui, 'Mountain of the Son of Duff', highest peak in the Cairngorms, featured in the title of his book "A Bobby on Ben Macdhui" published 24 years ago. And not least so close to the scene of the most tragic mountain rescue call out of Dad's career, when in November 1971, five Edinburgh schoolchildren and an assistant leader died during an emergency bivouac at Feith Buidhe on the Macdhui plateau – caught out by a severe and early winter storm. (Ed: see *Malcolm Duckworth's article on the Cairngorm Disaster elsewhere in this issue*).

A wee bit of background – Dad joined the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Constabulary (SNECC) in 1956. In 1959 he became involved with Mountain Rescue when he was selected (one of twelve) for the SNECC mountain rescue team – Britain's first official police mountain rescue team – conceived by Chief Constable Hunter and Superintendent Ingram.



*1960 – John Duff in Torridon – SNECC Police MR Team's first weekend training with RAF Kinloss.*

As a relatively young policeman, Dad was moved from Peterhead to Braemar in December 1964, and with the move became leader of the Braemar Police Mountain Rescue Team. He experienced a baptism of fire, or rather snow and ice, beginning with a call out just days after his arrival in the village to an avalanche on Beinn a'Bhuird. Three men were buried in the avalanche; a fourth had escaped to raise the alarm. A search party was organised and one body was found fairly quickly, but no signs of the other two. After the Tilley lamps and torch batteries had all but expired, the searchers left in the early hours, returning at first light. Miraculously, after being buried for 22 hours, Bob Burnett was found alive. Sadly, the other victim didn't make it.

This incident, along with several other serious call outs and rescues over the winter of 1964/65, encouraged the formation of the Braemar Mountain Rescue Association. The founders of the BMRA were seven: a clergyman, banker, Nature Conservancy warden, grocer, electrician, bus driver, and bobby (Dad). Dad was team leader until 1976, and withdrew from the BMRA in 1992 after 28 years of involvement. At 92 years of age, he is now the sole remaining founding member of the BMRA.



*Mid sixties – MR Training at the Pass of Bal'ater. Unknown person in stretcher, John Duff below stretcher.*

After the formation of the BMRA, there followed many years of hard work and fundraising, including the erection of the Goring Hut and the radio mast on Morrone at 2,819 feet; installation of telephones at Derry Lodge and Spittal of Muick; and eventually the addition of a Snowtrac and land rover – not to mention team training days and acquisition of equipment and clothing for the men (there were no women in the Braemar team in those days). Dad still has his original police-issue navy woollen balaclava with SNECC insignia and original Cairngorm Club badge. I feel sure that he would – excuse the pun – be quite lost today, with the range of equipment, vehicles and navigational devices now available. Not to mention the high-tech clothing and footwear.

I remember playing my part in the fundraising efforts too, along with many other local children, participating in the Highland Dancing displays on the Ballater Church Green on Sunday afternoons – with our teacher Bobby Watson often looking on.

As children we were very used to Dad not being around – he was either on duty, out on a rescue or on some sort of training session. We never worried about him, as we didn't really understand what he was doing (at least I didn't). However, I feel certain that mum had many sleepless nights over those years. I did grow up thinking however, that most people who went to the hills either never came back, or had to be rescued. Fortunately, I now know better and have joined the ranks of Munro 'baggers' (successfully completing in 2024) – not something that Dad would necessarily commend, however.

I have been looking through old copies of Cairngorm Club Journals these past few days, whilst putting this article together. Dad has a full collection of bound copies – going back to the first, somewhat ragged, volume of 1896. Said volume was previously owned by William C. Welsh and subsequently owned by Hugh D. Welsh – both signatures appearing on the cover sheet. It is with great interest that I have read some of the articles in these journals and admired the various beautiful fold-out 'Horizons from Ben Muich Dhui' by Alex Copland. I also understand that Hugh Welsh was President of the Club between 1938 and 1946. The mention of his name makes me smile as I recall when he used to come to Braemar in the sixties when I was a child. He often dropped in to see Dad around tea-time and my memory is that Hugh always wore the kilt and carried a wooden walking stick. I used to be bathed in the kitchen sink,

(not unusual for that era, I'm told...) and Hugh would 'threaten' to get in the sink with me – absolutely terrifying to my four-year-old self!

During the sixties and seventies, Dad wrote many articles for the Journal (mostly on statistics, safety, and mountain accidents). I browsed through those with interest too. One of his consistent mantras was that over-ambition was one of the main causes of walkers and climbers getting into difficulties in the mountains. He sticks to those words today, and I pay heed.

In 1967 Dad won a Winston Churchill Fellowship, allowing him to go to the US for six months to study Mountain Rescue. In 1973 he was awarded the BEM for services to Mountain Rescue, and in 1980 was made an Officer of the Order of St. John. So, his hard work and service did not go unnoticed.

Dad's summary of those years?

*"In over three decades of involvement with police and mountain rescue, there were moments of intense sadness, counterbalanced, thank goodness, by moments of enormous gratification. There was also a lot of camaraderie, practical jokes, hilarity and the odd row. Above it all, however, there has always been a feeling of privilege at being able to live and work so closely with the quiet, understated folk of the rural North-East. There are no finer folks".*

And I second that. Despite his fading memory, Dad still remembers and is very proud to continue to be a member of the Cairngorm Club. Here's to the next 100 years of the Ben Macdhui indicator!



*Isobel on Ben Macdhui - August 2020*

## **The White Ladder: Triumph and Tragedy at the Dawn of Mountaineering**

Book Review - by Ken Thomson

If you have never had the time or energy to read all those hefty books by or about the early world mountain explorers, from von Humboldt through Whymper and Conway, to the Duke of Abruzzi and Mallory, this is the book for you: a compendium of 24 short chapters about these and other famous (and one or two not-so-famous) names and their attempts at the world altitude record (the “Ladder”). In loose chronological order into the first half of the twentieth century, Light takes us through their efforts at high altitude, skipping most of the tedious details of funding, organisation and approach, and focussing on physical achievements in attempting some of the highest summits in the world. As well, he covers the often-fraught relationships between climbers, rival parties, hired porters and sometimes governments. Of particular Club interest are the sections on Norman Collie and Alexander Kellas (a chapter is even entitled ‘Fearlas Mor’, with the usual Macdui tale included), which covers the modest Kellas’s unusually close and appreciative relationship with his Sherpas, e.g. in breaking the world’s summit record on Pauhunri (23,375 feet) in 1911.

Other, and sometimes less admirable, characters include the ambitious but racist Fanny Bullock Workman (the first female mountaineer to get above 20,000 feet); the ‘unorthodox’ Scot Aleister Crowley (who some say was mad, and was certainly high-handed, bisexual and occultist); Charles Granville Bruce (leader of three Himalayan expeditions), who after moraine-hopping for days on end in 1892, wrote that this was ‘one of the finest trials to the temper that exists [and which] as a destroyer of respectable language, beats golf hollow’; and Arnold Henry Lander, who “had measured the summit of Mount Lumpa at a record-breaking 23,490 feet; he and his party had gained – then lost – almost 10,000 feet of elevation in a single day. All without climbing equipment of any kind and in boots ‘such as I would wear in London on a wet day’”.

At a cheap price, and with nearly 50 illustrations, over 200 references and an index, this is a useful as well as an entertaining book.

*The White Ladder: Daniel Light, Norton, 2025. 432pp. ISBN 9781324066217. Under £20 hardback).*

## Ken's Watch

by Bill James

This caper – an incident that plays in elastic time – transpired on *Creagan a' Choire Etchachan*. In February 1962, my friend Ken invited me to join him in attempting a first winter ascent of a known rock climb. At the time, my long suit was multi-day climbs on high mountain routes, but I grabbed the chance of a first winter ascent – especially as he had explored the route that summer.



Kenneth Alan Grassick (pictured on sea cliffs at Rainbow Inlet at Souter Head near Stonehaven) was then a 27-year-old medical student at Aberdeen University; I was 25, an engineering graduate student. He was a respected member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, spending most of his spare time in the Highland mountains, and had many first ascents. Further, he famously climbed Aberdeen University's Marischal College tower, and nefariously, as I remember the tale, into

the Queen Mother's House at Balmoral Castle, lifting a *By Appointment* toilet roll as trophy evidence. I was merely a superfit SAfrican ( "*Soufrican*") Drakensberg vagabond.

We formed a close-knit climbing group – Ken; two GPs and former classmates, Mike Taylor from Peterhead and (less often) Tom Patey from Ullapool; and a medic and graduate student in pathology, Graeme Nicol from Aberdeen. With four of the five in medicine, our conversation diffused grudgingly from the cult of evidence-based quackery to Scottish political history, to the military, and occasionally to engineering or even South Africa. Scottish and South African politics were then lively topics. This trip, however, was for just one rope: Ken and me. The climb, as planned, took place in that exceptional time of year when sufficiently icy conditions prevail on rock climbs, conditions bitter enough to qualify as a *winter ascent*. Keen climbers seize cold weather opportunities!

We hiked in from Derry Lodge, through the Caledonian pine forest, under the clucking watch of resident capercaillies, to the Hutchinson Memorial Hut. On the crags, the route starts from part-way up a gully, tracking out

across a smooth granite slab sloping at about seventy-five degrees. Critically, the far edge overhangs a vertical rock face that falls away to a considerable height.

In the photo of Ken on the route, he has progressed on crampons diagonally up and across the thin ice on smooth granite to the overhanging edge. The route follows and extends the line of the rope. He climbed then to a belay position perhaps thirty feet higher.



After leading across the slab and up the edge, Ken set up a sitting belay, while I as second followed also diagonally from lower right to upper left. When well across the slab, the adhering ice beneath the protruding front teeth of my crampons failed – it may have previously cracked under Ken's heavier passage.

Off I pendulated on an unravelling single rope across the slab and out into space, free-falling for a few seconds. Free-falling because Kenny, casually ensconced and somewhat unprepared, was wrenched off his seat – a freefalling body accelerates quickly, probably about 10,000 ft.lbs/sec in this case. It could happen to anyone. He was dislodged, the rope flew over his head and shoulder, running fast and free, coiling around his left arm, and ripping off his rather valuable gold watch. I saw it fall what seemed like several hundred feet, successively exploding into more and more components, like a multi-break aerial shell firework, but arcing not up but down, down, down, and out. I realised then, as now, that one's time on a mountain could end like the expensive watch, similarly dispersing inert bits ever-more thinly over a wild and inhospitable environment.

The standard ten-millimeter rope that was fixed around my waist in a trusty bowline – we could not afford fancy harnesses – worked its way up on my loose winter clothing. The lot ruffled together under my armpits, around my chest and shoulder blades, leaving my goose-pimpled torso exposed to Cairngorm's wintry winds. Or, since space-time was blurring, my trunk slipped down through the tangled rope and clothing. Either way, I was dangling in outer space, the rope that saved my life being fortuitously

and tightly knotted in a hitch around the fingers of Kenny's left hand. Just three of his fingers bore my 140-plus pounds gently swaying freely in fresh air. Kenny yelled in real pain. We were unsighted, but luckily within earshot, though probably no-one else was within twenty miles.

On the rock face but well out of reach, since the face was overhanging, I saw a lifesaver: a 10cm wide crack, too wide for a piton. It ran horizontally under an overhang crack and was ice-free! Ken, still painfully unseated but tied back to a peg, whimpering [sic] in agony, me swinging freely in space thirty-five feet below ... *not* the best way to spend a Scottish Sunday. "Hang on," says I, "if I move my centre of gravity synchronously, I may get this lump swinging" – which I managed though it took a wee while.

It was the first of many cautious manoeuvres I was to spend carefully planning and executing – the situation had become a full-scale timeless chess game. All moves leading to a winning endgame had to be planned ahead – a lapse in concentration meant quick defeat. Increasing the pendulations, I grabbed the crack, carefully inserted my piton hammer, if rather loosely (the very same hammer pictured) and hung a one-meter diameter rope sling over it, the two loose devices delicately if limply balanced. How could *sic a' clarty fix* hold?



With difficulty, feeling a hundred feet up, and encumbered with all my gear, I climbed into the precarious sling hanging on a loose hammer in the wide slot – *slowlee slowlee* – my head and face intimate with the cold granite face. I untied the bowline around my waist to free the climbing rope so that Ken could get himself properly anchored. Of course, that took *another wee while*, the problem being the 50% extensibility of a 100-ft nylon climbing rope (it's nearly impossible to untie an elastic cord if your 140+ lb body is hanging from it – try it!). Strange to relate, I had carried that beautiful, nautically spliced, white, cable-laid sling doubled around my neck and shoulder on many climbs in four countries on two continents for five years, and never used it, a vindication if ever there was one. Further, the climbing rope around my waist had been thoughtfully bowlined *outside* the sling – had it passed through the sling I wouldn't be writing this article.

Every slight movement had to be essential and planned in detail, probably thought out more than once, and gingerly executed. Though the view from my eyrie was probably unequalled, and photos would have been good, I disregarded my handy 1950s Kodak Retinette.

I had held onto the loose end of the rope and was able to re-attach myself to it; had I not done so it would have been checkmate for me, sitting forever in a weathered sling high up under an overhanging crag. In this way, another wee while accelerated by. In fact we were at last making infinitesimal headway – it seemed the situation might soon become promising.

Or not. When I unhitched myself from the sling hanging on the loose hammer, the rope of course pulled tight and stretched, dropping me another ten feet or so. Now it was a matter of Ken hanging onto the upper end, and me climbing up what was an uncomfortably thin rope - impossible you'd say, but sometimes the impossible happens inexplicably. Memory is fuzzy here, but probably the rope ascent was an uncoordinated combination of my legs flailing around snagging the rope between legs and feet, and Ken yanking the lump upwards systematically using both legs, two of us grunting without shame. Fortuitously, for no good reason I had practised the general technique of climbing up under the grand staircase in the entrance hall of Strathcona House at the Rowett Institute, which certainly helped. This was surely the longest of those accumulating wee whiles, but I was a super-fit rugby and ultramarathon enthusiast.



At long last the only remaining problem was climbing over the rock edge on a rope necessarily tight over the rock surface.

If you think that's easy, show me!

Eventually we were together on the summit plateau.

Resident ptarmigans in winter plumage, sounding like old tin clockwork toys reminded us that life had continued oblivious of our efforts on the very

edge of eternity. We toddled off down to Derry Lodge and home, chastened. We had shown that patience and simple Newtonian mechanics can cope with gravitational dynamics. As to the messed-up climb, *siccan a sotfar* we kept to ourselves, as is the practice, I believe, of all reputable climbers, especially if no-one is in sight or earshot.

Months later, Ken claimed insurance for the watch. Apparently in accordance with best post-war Scottish undergraduate student practice, insurance payout resulted in *two* new watches. For a good few decades it measured time from a daymare when we twice cheated that which is coming to us all: one big-time, and the second, *ye'll nae be mindin', jes a wee mindin'...*

We never wrote up that winter ascent. Had we climbed unroped, I would have simply slipped down more or less under control and landed upright gently in the soft snow-filled gully a few feet below – the slip would have been utterly unremarkable and long forgotten. In the 1960s, we felt secure when roped, *yet it was the rope that pulled me out into space and near-disaster*. The story is not without precedent: a century earlier, during the descent after Edward Whymper's 1865 successful first ascent of the Matterhorn, their rope was thought to have contributed to four members of his seven-man party falling to their deaths.

Good friends, how I miss them; alas, all are gone now. *Wha's like us?* Looking back now, I see that Ken Grassick forced our climbs; Graeme Nicol would have buttered no parsnips retelling the tale in his inimical British Commando voice; Mike Taylor, ten years our senior, would have radiated safety; Tom Patey would have composed a song. If asked, I might advise: practice climbing up a rope, carry a good sling, and wear a cheap watch.

*\* Ken spent six years in the Royal Air Force in Singapore, then 18 years as a GP in Newcastle, and died at 53 of acute leukaemia. He was survived by his brother (another GP), two sons and two daughters, and his wife Norma. I happily married an Aberdeen lass, had two sons, and became an engineering academic at a Canadian university.*

## Dolomite Walking

by Brian Davey

The Dolomites of the Italian Alps must be among the most beautiful mountain ranges in the world. Their soaring peaks rise very steeply if not vertically from a landscape of well groomed alpine meadows and verdant pine forests.

When they first hit your eyes, they really are an awesome sight. Their lofty peaks rise from vivid green lower slopes. In every direction you look, there before you are the ingredients of a picture postcard.



The magnificent vistas at every turn illustrate the stark contrast between their greyish-white, bare, limestone rock faces and the clear-clean high altitude air of a blue sky, often mixed in summer with patchy fair weather cumuli-form clouds.

The Dolomites are said to get their name from the French geologist Deodat de Dolomieu who was able to differentiate between dolomite, (calcium magnesium carbonate) and calcite, (calcium carbonate), the two types of limestone which are the main constituents of these mountains. For a non-geologist it is difficult to accept the fact that these high mountains are the remains of marine sediments and coral that were deposited below shallow open seas some 230 million years ago. They were then uplifted to become spectacular mountains by tectonic plate movements along with the rest of the Alps some 65 million years ago. The evidence for this can still be observed in the fossilised shells and marine creature remains in pieces of rock to be found among the Dolomite paths. In more recent geological time, the elements of wind, rain, snow and ice

have carved out today's landscapes of deep U-shaped glaciated valleys and lake beds.

The beauty and attraction of these mountains is widely acknowledged certainly within Europe. The number of visitors to this part of Northeast Italy is a testament to this beauty. In winter when the mountains are snow covered, hundreds of thousands of tourists arrive to enjoy the benefits of the region's highly developed ski industry. In summer a multitude of ski lifts remain in operation to take a great multitude of walkers effortlessly into the higher reaches of the mountains.

Yes, this can be a lazy-person walking territory if that is your preference. And why not? After all, you must remind yourself that you are on holiday. You will need to conserve all your energy for the numerous high-level traverses of the Alta Via, also for the downhill walks back to the apres-sport life of your valley resort. But if you are the type of person with unlimited time and perfect fitness who must get up to the top under their own steam, there is no need to feel inhibited by the lure of cheap transport. For the summer months, the ski lift companies only charge a fraction of the price of winter lift passes. It is even possible to buy a much cheaper weekly card, which gives you access to a wide range of gondolas, chairlifts and a certain type of lift they call the coffin lift. This card also includes free travel with the local bus company that has the unfortunate acronym of S.A.D. Don't ask me what that stands for, but I'm sure it has nothing to do with lazy walkers.

The coffin lift is a frightening, perpetually moving, two person coffin-shaped cage that hoists you for about 15 minutes in claustrophobic standing mode to a high-level col in the impressive Sassolungo Group of mountains.



From this point some high altitude panoramic walking is possible, descending down a small glacier, passing two Alpine Huts on the way while enjoying some classical Dolomite mountain views.

From this col there is also the opportunity to climb the intimidating 3181 meter Sassolungo peak. However, I would highly recommend taking along a qualified local Alpine Guide booked through the nearest Tourist Office if this is your ambition. Although I was not in the least tempted to tackle this particular peak myself, I was assured by a Guide that it was not as difficult as the almost vertical 3000 feet north face suggests.

The Alta Via routes, as the name suggests, are high-level, long distance walks through some stunning mountain scenery. They follow well maintained tracks, usually old shepherd's paths or former military mule tracks. Many of these tracks are said to have been supply routes that date back to the First World War when this area was a war zone. At that time Italy and Austria fought bitterly over national boundaries, frequently running along ridges or mountain watersheds. Some of these boundaries are still not well defined as witnessed by the 1991 dispute between Italy and Austria over their ownership of Otzi the iceman whose 5300 year old frozen body was found by a couple of German hikers just 93 metres inside the Italian line of the border. Otzi is named after the Austrian valley of Otztal near where he was found, and can now be seen in a climate controlled casket at the Archaeological Museum of Balzano. A one-day visit to this interesting old Italian town can make a relaxing rest from the rigours of hill walking.

Today the Dolomite Area is well within the borders of Italy, established under the settlement of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. A surviving echo of this conflict is the confusion posed by the places and mountains, which are named in both Italian and German and sometimes in Ladin, another local language of this region.

Apart from the differing place names and sign posts, one of the nice things to be found along the tracks is the good number of mountain huts or refuges, most with walker or climber only access. They are situated in the most unlikely of locations where all supplies have to be carried in by aerial cableway, helicopter or mule. Here for a fairly reasonable cost you can stay overnight and enjoy restaurant style meals and drinks. Can you envisage or would you even want to imagine these facilities at the top of any of our Scottish Munros? But this is the Dolomites where mass tourism coupled to easy access accessibility is the order of the day. In contrast to the wilds of Scotland where I have sometimes walked alone for 10 hours

and never met another human being, here solitude is not an option for long, at least not in summer time. But there again don't let that put you off. Somewhere along the way you're bound to meet some very friendly Italian, German, Austrian or American people and perhaps even walkers from somewhere nearer to home.

The Alpine Huts or refuges are sometimes run by local councils, clubs or private families but are mostly run by the C.A.I. No nothing to do with the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA but the Italian Alpine Club. Along with the local valley authorities, they have assumed the responsibility of not only running and looking after the refuges, but of maintaining and numbering the tracks. For someone accustomed to navigating in Scotland across vast areas, often without paths over open mountain terrain, the frequent marking of routes with stripes of red and white paint on rocks or trees at very close intervals will seem a bit over the top. I'm sure the same amount of marking in Scotland would bring howls of horror from many environmentalists and would have people like Cameron McNeish running around our beloved hills with great pots of paint stripper. There is obviously a great surfeit of red and white paint in Italy!

Looking at the plus points, you are unlikely to get lost even if you don't have a map and compass. However, I would strongly recommend carrying these, as route finding must change dramatically in winter when the paint markings are quickly obliterated by ice and snow, and sometimes at higher levels even in summer. However, given the popularity of the Alta Via in summer, the number of ant-like walkers can mark a distant path miles away from your current position. Apart from myself, the only other person I noticed during my Dolomite travels with anything that looked like a compass turned out to be some poor myopic bloke with a magnifying glass!

'Tabacco', 'Kompass' and 'Geographical' publish some good walking maps on various scales. Other locally produced walker's maps must be treated with caution because they are not always orientated with North at the top of the sheet and some rarely show any grid at all. Also when latitude and longitude grid reference is given, the grid points are so far apart as to render them almost useless even with the added assistance of a GPS (Global Positioning System). However local maps are often printed on the back with a panoramic 3-dimensional picture. This is helpful in the

visualisation of the poor contour representation shown on the other side. Local map symbols can also be misleading and off-putting with difficult paths designated with different symbols. And don't be too surprised if you anticipate a difficult section ahead and find in place a well-constructed wooden staircase over what would have been a moderate scramble. These aids were obviously designed for the vast Italian/German/Austrian tourist market or perhaps intended to lessen the casualty rate at the local hospital Accident and Emergency Unit.

Some difficult stretches that are definitely not for the vertigo prone person are marked as 'via ferrate'. They are usually exposed parts of a route where steel cables have been bolted into the rock face to facilitate a safe passage. Again it is worthwhile consulting an Alpine Guide beforehand about the degree of difficulty and exposure



that you are likely to encounter. Some of the via ferrate sections I encountered actually turned out to be nothing worse than a steel cable handrail that you could comfortably take your granny along. Other routes such as the famous Tridentina Route of the Sella Groupe Range can be a real climbing experience. Here you'll meet some of the most exposed pitches imaginable with cast-iron memorials to climbers who died at that point, set into the cliff face to needlessly remind you of your perilous position. To negotiate this type of via ferrate, essential equipment is a helmet, harness, rope and karabiner, not to mention a good head for heights!

If I have captured your imagination, how about a future Cairngorm Club International Meet in the Dolomites?!

## **Words from a Mountain Makar**

by Tony Jack

### **Streap**

I hear the hills calling my name  
Time again to leave my hame  
We're waiting for you, I hear them call  
Standing proud, so mighty and tall  
Through the Glen, I feel the dawn rise  
Candy floss clouds, float up high  
Hike in wonder at such a magnificent place  
As morning blooms, exposing its face  
Heading North, Streap ahead  
An eagle takes flight from resting bed  
Catching thermals as it soars up high  
Simple beauty, you cannot buy  
Stag ahead on rugged ridge  
Majestic, with its pointed crown  
Snorting, grunting, stares me down  
Descends valley below, bucks follow, gallop in full flow  
Sun rises high, soak up its rays  
Target reached, I look out far and away  
It's time to head down leave this hill behind  
Grateful of what I've been given  
On a day that's all mine

### **Bunkhouse**

If only I could bottle this all up  
My secret that no one else knows  
This bottle would have to be clear  
So I can look inside, watch the show  
See you all laughing, drinking, all your smiling faces  
Sitting round the big table, contented at your places  
Telling tales of your travels, mountains climbed,  
Over great food, cold beer, a glass of wine  
All these memories we create, all lost when we move on  
If only I could bottle this all up, so I can look inside,  
Watch the show before I'm gone

## **A Mountain Life - a Conversation with David (Heavy) Whalley**

by Mark Norris

*[A word from the Editor: David (Heavy) Whalley was one of Scotland's best known characters in the world of Mountain Rescue. I had the privilege of interviewing David at the end of 2024, when he was terminally ill. A poignant meeting.]*

MN: Many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed David.

DW: Good to see you - apparently I should be a goner by now - they gave me to October, but I am still here!

MN: Oh, well, I'm glad we're having this interview then!

DW: But I'm charging you double the fee - so that means it's gone from nothing to nothing!

MN: If we could start with your upbringing - you grew up in South West Scotland, is that right?

DW: I was born in Ayr, and my dad was a minister at Castle Douglas. I was the only child born in Ayr - there were five of us and from our home we often went up the Merrick and the surrounding hills. It was just great because my parents gave me a love of the outdoors. I was quite wild as a youngster, so I think my parents were glad to see me getting out to the hills and the like.

### **RAF Mountain Rescue**

DW: Because there were no jobs about in the early 70's, I joined the military. I had no intention of getting into the military but I saw the adverts and I thought, can I get into this? I joined just after the Cairngorm Disaster, so that would be 1971. And when I applied to join the RAF Mountain Rescue team they took me in even though I was too skinny. I was seven stones or something.

MN: I guess that's where the nickname (Heavy) comes from?

DW: True! I was just 17. But then, you know, the minute I was on the Mountain Rescue team, I was out every weekend going to different places across Scotland each time. After I joined the team and once they

knew I was in RAF catering (which means you can do the rations and logistics) I went on all the expeditions - about 40 in total, including Everest. That was magnificent, you know. I planned and managed all of the provisions from advanced Base Camp, which is the same height as Denali in Alaska - 21,500 feet. It's bloody high. But we'd been building up our altitude capability and gone to various mountains in Pakistan over 20,000 feet beforehand. So we had an apprenticeship in the big mountains.

MN: Wow I didn't know that you'd done so much overseas as well as in Scotland. You must have been super fit, then, for many years.

DW: Aye. We also did loads of trips to the Alps and then Canada in winter, and we were one of the first groups ever from Scotland to climb on the frozen waterfalls there. We had a great bunch of mountaineers.

MN: And is that what ultimately became your main passion, then? Mountain Rescue within the RAF?

DW: Yes, and there were many young lads who joined the RAF and Mountain Rescue at that time. They were often a bit wild, but after three months in the team they soon learned and we became friends as well as colleagues. The military and mountain rescue gave them life skills. And years later we had a reunion, and they gave me a painting (of Ben Nevis) that is on my wall. Which was lovely.

You worked Monday to Friday, and then you were out on the weekends. You know, it was a huge commitment when you think about it. We would go and train in a different location in Scotland every weekend.

When I became team leader in the 80's we covered all the aircraft crashes in Scotland.

And it's the anniversary tomorrow (7th December) of the F1-11 that crashed on the most beautiful mountain in Skye, Sgurr na Stri, which is only 1500 feet. There are still family members of the aircrew who get in touch, because they want to know what happened. And I'll take them up the mountain but I won't stay the night because I can't handle the night - it's too much. We flew in at 7pm, it was pitch dark and we were in a snow blizzard when we were dropped by helicopter at the Camunasary bothy. There were some folks staying there for the night - including Geordie who

is a good friend now. They had come out of the bothy when they heard the impact and were covered in white residue from the crash. The air was full of a mixture of snow, fuel and smoke.

Eventually we found the crash site. It was really tricky getting there - steep with wet snow on every ledge. The F1-11 has an ejection pod you know, like the space shuttle, and we found the pod with both pilot and navigator killed.

It was the hardest night of my life.

MN: What other high's and low's have stayed with you over the years?

DW: There have been many hard rescues. On one late night call out we got dropped off on Ben Macdhui in the Cairngorms, to look for a family of three, and the conditions became so severe we had to rope up to get back. Crawling, at one point. That particular call out did not have a happy ending.

On another time, we joined a big search on the Ben for a young guy, must have been 16. It was Christmas time and he was wearing a pair of plastic boots which were a thing then, and went up the Ben and got lost. My team had just come back from Glencoe dealing with fatality after fatality. There were multiple mountain rescue teams involved in the search and I was helping organise things from Fort William police station, with Pete Kirkpatrick who was Team Leader at RAF Leuchars in charge on the ground. We'd been away for about nine days back and forth, and when the call came in I said to my team - I know we all want to go home, but there's a wee boy missing. And the whole team stayed. And it was on the last day of the search that they found him, and he was still alive.

And, you know, he ended up becoming a nurse, which was great. But he wouldn't have lasted another night - he'd ripped his plastic emergency survival bag and he was done in. And, you know, and it was only because they spotted a hand. Waving. And well, when they found him and the news came over the radio, you should have heard the shout back at the police station. Everybody was cheering.

Getting folks out alive, particularly when the conditions were bad, was just wonderful.

## **Lockerbie**

MN: Can we talk a little bit about Lockerbie?

DW: There were four teams, plus all the local civilian teams and their dogs. Some of us were there for three months, accommodated in the high school gym. After we arrived at the school gym, the next minute it was full of ladies cooking for us all. Fantastic. It's such a strange thing where you get such horror like that happening how all the community pulls together. We found the black box on the first light search. And then eventually all 164 bodies. You couldn't move in or do anything. It was like, honestly, a scene from hell.

There's a book called Trauma written by Professor Gordon Turnbull, and he was the guy that came to talk to us all to counsel us on how to deal with what we had seen. We didn't know about post-traumatic stress and stuff like that, and I became a big pusher on that after the Lockerbie business, when all we needed help. I had a breakdown after it, because colleagues were all coming to me with stress, which added to my own. Most of the Lockerbie team were just young lads, which was tough for them. But many years later we did a big cycle to Syracuse, where 30 odd students killed in the Lockerbie crash came from. That helped clear the demons a lot.

## **Climbing Characters**

MN: You must have met a few other characters over the years as well. One of your long standing good friends was Hamish MacInnes?

DW: What a great guy Hamish was. I still miss his calls. He was such a good man and was also astoundingly clever. He also rescued me when I was a boy when my dad and mum and I were coming off Bidean nam Bian one summer and he was up there photographing. It was poor weather, and the weather came in. He could hear us and knew that we were coming down the wrong gully by mistake. And he got us, took us for tea in his house. And later in life when I met him properly for the first time, I said, you won't remember me, and Hamish said, no but I remember your dad! And I said, well I remember you - because we prayed for you every week in the church!

MN: Of course! Hamish was a Castle Douglas man wasn't he. What a great story.

DW: Yeah, and my Dad always did a sermon on Hamish every year!

MN: I remember when Hamish's documentary, Final Ascent came out. My wife and I were in London at that time, and we went along to the premier, and we met one of his other very good friends, Michael Palin. We went up at the end of the film, and had a chat with Michael - what a lovely man he is. He clearly loved Hamish, and talked about his E-type, flying around the roads of Glencoe.

DW: Aye, Hamish designed the first all-metal axe, the Terrordactyl - and sold 5,000 of them to the MOD and NATO. That's how bought his E-type! I think it was yellow, if I remember correctly. Beautiful car. He was revolutionary in some of his thinking.

More recently I've just done a film with Robbie Phillips, who's been out to St. Kilda putting new routes up. He's a great guy - I met him in Skye where we've done a thing too. The Skye film comes out next year (2026). His St. Kilda one has just finished its tour. And the thing about St. Kilda is you can't really get out there unless you're all properly organised - I did three rescues out there.

MN: Really? What kind of rescues?

DW: Bird watchers - believe it or not. Slipping on the goo - they don't realise everywhere's so slimy!

MN: Looking at today's climbing world, what do you think about the 'Red Bull' dimension, where particularly a few of the younger climbers are doing pretty risky stuff. Is extreme climbing and mountaineering something that you think is a good thing or not?

DW: Oh I think it's the way people are, and I don't think you'll ever change it. It's also very hard to make a living out of the mountains, so I understand why good climbers push the boundaries sometimes. I'm very lucky because I've got a military pension, and it's great to see the likes of Robbie who make their living from climbing and sponsorship. I've always thought that young people are the future. And some of them have a great ethos you know. There's a runner and climber - Uisdean Hawthorn if I

remember correctly. I did a big chat with him in 2018 when he'd just done the Skye Cuillin ridge in 5 hours - in winter. I mean it would take me that time now to get up onto the ridge! Anyway we did an event for his local Scouts. It was mobbed, hundreds at it. And it was great listening to his thought processes as he talked about his achievement. And after our chat I said to him, have you got any of your family here?

And he says well my granny's here with me. And I said to her - what do you think of what Uisdean has just done? And she replied, well I've just done the Highland Cross\* - and I'm nearly 75! So I said to her - it's obviously the genes then!

*\*The Highland Cross is a 50-mile duathlon (20 miles on foot, 30 miles on bike) traversing the Scottish Highlands coast to coast, west to east from Kintail through Glen Affric and Strathglass to Beaulieu.*

## **And Now**

MN: And what did you do after you eventually left the military?

DW: Well, I went on tour in America speaking and working with Yosemite Mountain Rescue, which was great, and also a couple of smaller tours to Morocco and elsewhere. I have also spoken often at outdoors and mountain events, and written a lot over the years about my experiences and stories on my online blog (<https://heavywhalley.wordpress.com>).

But more recently you know it's been quite special the number of people I've met since I have been terminally ill, and also received hundreds of letters, saying how much I had affected their lives. You don't realise that at the time.

I walk every day, but I miss the mountains. Because the mountains are my life - I just love the solitude. Along with my dog, Teallach, we did the Munros in the 80s. Him and me on the hill together, when I was very fit. You know, it was a different world. I get a lot of solitude out of the mountains, and peace. I love the mountains, they're just part of me.

MN: How long did you have Teallach for?

DW: Twelve years and twelve days - he was just great. He was able to get up on even the craggiest mountains, and did the Skye ridge with me, over

two days. We did it on our own - he was a better climber than me! We often went climbing in the Cairngorms for 8 or 9 hours, and he was always waiting ahead.

MN: So, I guess the last question is as you mentioned, you've got a terminal illness. Are you managing to handle that okay?

DW: Yeah, I mean it's a bit of a mind game at first to take it in. I got the diagnosis in March so I wrote an article - 'No deid yet!' But I'm surrounded by loving people.

MN: That's great. Do you ever hear the voice of your father, the minister, in the back of your mind?

DW: Aye often when I was having a bit of an epic! And the answer always came back - follow the dog, follow the dog! For me when it comes to religion, I've been in places like Tibet, India and Pakistan, and there is clearly something there. It's the spiritual dimension, isn't it? You know, you can have your religion, black and white, but you can also have your spirituality, and you can't not have that - especially if you are in the mountains.

DW: And of course, my mum. I think my mum taught me a lot, as well, because she was very kind. She gave me a way of being, and I think the communication, looking after people, came from my mum.

MN: Well David, what a life you have lived.

It has been an absolute pleasure to listen to you today.

I feel we could have gone on so much longer. Thank you so much.



*Footnote: David Whalley passed away in 2025. His ashes are scattered near one of his favourite bothies - Shenaval.*

*Rest in Peace, Heavy.*

## **Mischief at Muir**

by Richard Shirreffs

The Club Journal has done a good job over the years in chronicling the major stages in the life of Muir Cottage, but little has ever been recorded about some of the lesser events and trials and tribulations of Custodians.

On one occasion in the 1970s a school party (not from Aberdeen) staying at Muir contrived to fell one tree and severely mutilate another on the land next to Muir then belonging to the Mar Estate. The Club was left having to write in apologetic terms to the Estate, as well as writing in critical terms to the head teacher of the school in question. There was a similar occasion a little later when a party of French scouts had been allowed by the Estate to set up camp in the field to the west of Muir, with the Club allowing them the use of some of the facilities at Muir. Wanting a campfire for the evening, some of the scouts found and cut up a recently fallen pine tree on the east side of Muir, and used some of it as campfire fuel. The Estate were not amused. After some correspondence the scout group was obliged to pay compensation for the lost timber value.

Within Muir, fire has only twice been an issue. On one occasion, in early 1979, the wood panelling on the wall around the stove caught fire, presumably from careless use of the stove, but happily it was quickly brought under control. Less quick though was a decision on how to make good the damage, with insurers taking several months over their input. It was only at the end of 1979 that a decision could be reached to remove the panelling altogether and to leave the wall with a hard rendered surface. Some years later, when the dormitories still had fairly primitive tube heaters, someone in the two-bed room left wet socks drying in a position where they dropped onto the heater, catching fire and causing the curtains above to catch fire and crack the window glass. Fortunately this was quickly detected and the fire extinguished, but the scorch marks above the window are there to this day. This mishap led to the taking in of more fire extinguishers (with insulated boxes to prevent them from freezing) and to efforts to make the drying room more effective.

Over the years Muir has seen a range of different types of stove. One stove could take coal as well as wood but it was realised that this led to unwanted sooting of the white paintwork. The next stove worked well enough but eventually had to be replaced. At one side it had somewhat

inconspicuous and unhappily flimsy airflow control vents which few users understood. The next for some reason had front doors that we were not supposed to open, with refuelling through the lid potentially hazardous, especially after a careless user managed to break off the lug on the lid for lifting it open. More recently, possibly from users running the stove too hot, firebricks have had to be replaced. And still more recently the doors have been shut with too many logs in place, with the glass in the doors cracked and having to be replaced. So far replacement stove parts have been sourceable when needed, but that may not always be the case as there come to be fewer stoves in use and fewer stockists.

In the late 1970s, there was quite an issue over the acceptability of members having young children with them at Muir. One school of thought was that Muir was a climbing hut and no place for young children. The other view was that members' children might become members of the future if afforded the opportunity in their formative years to experience the outdoors. Given the extensive debate and lack of an outcome, it seems with hindsight to have been much ado about nothing. Discussion within the committee led to a suggestion that family weekends might be tried on a purely experimental basis for one or two weekends over a six month period. The Custodian at the time was opposed to this and arranged a requisition for a general meeting, but withdrew it when the committee agreed to leave matters until the next AGM on the basis of something already said in the Members' Handbook about the Custodian's discretion. The topic ended up not even mentioned at that next AGM, but it resurfaced a year later, with a rather odd outcome. Two motions were proposed, one suggesting specific circumstances in which young children should be allowed at Muir and the other suggesting a remit to the Committee to formulate guidelines for the assistance both of the Huts Custodian and of members. After some initial discussion, doubt emerged as to the order in which the formal proposing and seconding of these motions had occurred. Before the Chairman could rule on which should first be put to the vote, a member who clearly thought that this was not something to take up AGM time moved a motion of "next business". There was an equality of votes on this and the Chairman exercised his casting vote in favour of the motion, stating that he regarded the matter as one calling for further discussion by the Committee. The matter was on the committee agenda in March of the following year but there was no time to discuss it and there is no further mention of it in the minutes!

In general, things that belong at Muir seldom go missing, but there was a time when the abundant stock of teaspoons shrank to a miserable handful. Some may inadvertently have been left in the instant coffee jars of departing users, but we will never know. However, some cheap adequate replacements were sourced by a member at a Spanish street market. Another more important thing which temporarily went missing was the key for the woodshed. When it was traced and returned, the Custodian of the day fitted it with a bright orange plastic ball 6 cm in diameter - too large to fit in anyone's pocket and too noticeable to be left inadvertently in someone's car boot. These instances of things going missing are perhaps understandable, but on one occasion when bedding was being laundered we were found to be seven pillowcases down.

Notices for users to read and observe have been a constant problem, especially those about the use of the stove and the need not to interfere with the heaters relied upon for prevention of frost damage in the winter. On one occasion the last of a visiting group to leave in winter was the custodian of his own club's hut. He decided in his wisdom that despite all the notices beside the heaters, it would be unsafe to leave the electricity on. Fortunately our own Custodian had reason to visit Muir not long afterwards, found the cottage uncommonly chilly, and got the power and heating back on before any damage was done. In another instance winter visitors from another club had ignored the signage in the kitchen and switched off the heater there; again by good fortune a Club member arrived a day or two later and found some of the plumbing positively frozen, but at least not spawning any leaks when brought back up to temperature. Then, to add insult to injury, a group from the club with the meddlesome custodian was back two years later, again in winter, and again left Muir with no heating. This time they did not just switch off individual heaters but "untripped" nearly all of the tripswitches in the meter cupboard, which would have left any new visitors arriving in darkness hours without any lighting and with the remedy not exactly obvious. The problem with notices for users is that if they are too wordy or too numerous they do not get read, but if they are not there at all users assume that they just use heaters, cookers, and fridges as if they were in their own permanently occupied homes. One past custodian had a very apt term for visitors who create problems like these - morons!

On another occasion the hallway was found to be abnormally hot and the thermostat was found to have been tampered with - something possible only by undoing the four screws of the ventilated metal box around the thermostat. Whoever was responsible for this might be forgiven for wanting a little more heat, but he/she could surely have had the sense to undo their tampering. There has also occasionally been tampering with the plumbing, one instance leading to a discharge from an overflow, another stopping the flow of water to the wash-hand basins in one of the washrooms.

When it was decided in 2005 to replace the fixed bunks built in at the time of the 1972-73 extension, it was agreed that the 30+ year old flooring in the bedrooms should also be replaced. On starting to lift the old flooring, the contractor found that the concrete underneath was wet, meaning that his glue for the new flooring would not take. The matter was of some urgency as the flooring had to be down and the new bunks in place before the next visitors arrived and while the flooring contractor could still be available. Word was relayed to the Custodian (the present writer) at his office desk, and after he had made enquiries of industrial equipment providers four heavy duty dehumidifiers available for hire were collected and taken to Muir within the day and left to run overnight to await the contractor's return later next day.

Until a new source of water was found and connected up in the context of the refurbishments in 2004-05, the water supply was a constant source of problems. A mini-weir in a small stream in the area across the road from Muir (then a newly planted plantation) diverted water into a small settling tank which fed a copper pipe down to and under the road, and thence to the cottage. Every so often the catchment had to be cleared out, with care taken not to upset any of the adders which lived close by. If there was any restriction in the flow, it could be exacerbated by the catchment point being only marginally higher than the reservoir tanks in the roof space at Muir. And over time, as the growing trees drew more water from the ground and the removal of fencing allowed access for deer and potential contamination of the water, this source proved to be simply insufficient. The new source, found by a dowser, has so far been plentiful and largely problem free, but it led to one amusing incident in the days before the fence was provided with a stile. A young council official sent out to inspect

the catchment could not get across the fence until she was shown how to do so by an octogenarian member!

A new form of mischief has come to afflict us with the advent of electric cars. Although Braemar does have charging points, these are five miles away and often in use. So some visitors with electric cars have devised their own solution – running an extension cable out through a kitchen window from one of the sockets there! One at least has offered some money for the privilege, but others have not.

No doubt new forms of mischief at Muir will crop up over the years ahead. But we have a good record of Custodians coping with them, and hopefully that situation will not change.

## Caves and Howffs in the Cairngorms

by Mike Duguid and Ken Thomson

Given the troglodytic nature of the Club's creation after a night spent by its six founders under the Shelter Stone in 1887, it may be of no surprise that some current members are interested in discovering subterranean shelters of both historic interest and pragmatic function, lying within our area's mountains. Occasional discussion led to a realisation that the available information on many of these locations was sparse and rarely accurate, and in 2024 a loose project emerged to go forth, search for, and document our discoveries. Although the bothies and some of the howffs of the Cairngorms are quite widely known, caves in the range are less familiar, but there are a surprising number.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a 'cave' is "*a hollow place opening more or less horizontally under the ground; a cavern, den, habitation in the earth*", while a 'howff' is "*a place of resort; a haunt, a resort*", from the Dutch *hof*, or enclosure, with the "*first recorded appearance [in 1711, as 'howf'] as the yard of the Grey Friars*" in Dundee<sup>1</sup>. Thus a cave, if large, accessible and comfortable enough, may be a howff, while not all howffs are caves, but simply shelters built up with local stones and perhaps some brought-in material (wood, polythene) against a vertical rock wall.

In this article, we exclude 'bothies', as originally being basic huts constructed for shepherds, farmworkers (especially in North-East Scotland), road-workers, etc., even though some have more recently been gentrified by the Mountain Bothies Association. We also exclude built shelters, such as the "secret" bothy in Glen Slugain, the half-ruined St. Valery's on Cairngorm, the ones in the Garbh Choire of Cairn Toul – Braeriach and on the Coyles of Muick, and souterrains (e.g. those near Ballater and Kingussie), as well as cave pitches on rock and ice climbs.

We take the Cairngorms as basically the area of the National Park, although there are some caves and howffs nearer Aberdeen, e.g. on Bennachie. Definitely excluded are caves and howffs further afield, such as the fine natural "Bone Caves" of Inchnadamph in the North-West, all sea-cliff caves, of which Scotland has hundreds, from Fingal's Cave on

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<sup>1</sup> Scots Language Centre.

Staffa downwards, and well-known hill caves and howffs elsewhere, as in Arrochar, and under Schiehallion. The Grampian Speleological Group maintains a list<sup>2</sup> of some 290 locations throughout Scotland, and alleges over 3000 known natural caves in the country, usually in areas where soluble rock such as limestone is gradually dissolved by water over time (karst), although 'slip-faults', 'boulder caves' 'archaeological' (i.e. artificial) caves, and many disused metal and stone mines are also included. The Group's map of five "Caving Regions in Scotland" does not include the North-East of Scotland or the Cairngorms.

Granite is an igneous rock, formed when magma from the earth's interior slowly cooled and crystallized as it was forced ("intruded") as a "pluton" towards the surface through older Dalradian rock. As it contracted, vertical fissures appeared, and later, as pressure was released, horizontal ones; these fissures widened and deepened when exposed to surface erosion, as exhibited in the many cross-sectioned cliff faces such as on Lochnagar, but seldom sufficiently to form caves. Instead, most Cairngorm caves and howffs are found under large blocks, either deposited by glacial action some 11,000 years ago or fallen in more recent times from eroding cliffs (e.g. the Shelter Stone).

Other caves and howffs in the Cairngorms are found in the layered Dalradian rocks, composed of metamorphosed shales, sandstones and quartzites, and lying around the central plutons. For instance, at the Colonel's Bed in Glen Ey, slabs of flat-lying quartzite with intercalated schist broke off and left a sheltered area (recently reduced by further breakages) in the gorge where the Colonel apparently hid.

From man's first explorations of the Cairngorms in Mesolithic times 4000 to 10000 years ago, shelter would have been a high priority, and doubtless natural caves were used and improved by the earliest incomers. However, the limited number and size of these caves, and no doubt their repeated use over centuries, mean that no traces of early use have been found in the caves covered by this article<sup>3</sup>. Instead, early uses are known only from

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Cave and Mine Database (<https://registry.gsg.org.uk>). See also *The Caves of Scotland: a Bibliography* by Tony Oldham (2012), available at [www.arbarama.com/cave/scotland/caves\\_biblio.html](http://www.arbarama.com/cave/scotland/caves_biblio.html).

<sup>3</sup> See 'Hunter-Gatherers in the Cairngorm Mountains', by Graeme Warren in *CCJ* no. 114 (2022), 130-143.

legends and accounts in historical times. Several were used by robbers, caterans, poachers, drovers and traders – the spectrum is wide and fuzzy – as they traversed wild country, not always keen to meet up with local authority. And after whisky began to be taxed in 1644, distillers and smugglers would have found it helpful to pursue their occupations in similar fashion. Shepherds and game hunters might also have used caves and howffs occasionally, though the estates in the nineteenth century provided better accommodation in the form of lodges and deer-watching shelters. The modern era has seen much use of caves and howffs by hillwalkers and climbers.

### ***Some Selected Caves and Howffs***

#### The Shelter Stone

This is of course the most famous of all the Cairngorms caves and howffs, not least as sheltering the six progenitors of the Cairngorm Club before their inaugural meeting on the shores of Loch Avon in 1887<sup>4</sup>. But of course it was known and written about long before that: the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*<sup>5</sup> says that “*at one end of this loch [Aven’], surrounded with vast mountains, is a large natural cave, sufficient to hold a number of men secure from snow, rain or wind. People often lodge here for nights, some for necessity, others when hunting or fishing. It is commonly called Chlachdhian, or the “Sheltering Stone.”* Since 1924, a Visitor Book has been placed below the Stone; 14 of these are in the Club’s Archives, and extracts have been published<sup>6</sup>.

#### Devil’s Point or Geusachan Cave

Given its location so near Corroul Bothy and the busy Lairig Ghru, this little cave is surprisingly shy. It has been mentioned in two Journal

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The Cairngorm Club’, by Robert Lippe, *CCJ* no. 1 (1893), 7-14.

<sup>5</sup> *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, Sinclair, 1794, in Vol. XIII, ‘Abernethy and Kinchardine, County of Inverness’, p.131.

<sup>6</sup> *Chronicles of the Cairngorms: Stories from the Shelter Stone Visitors’ Book*, by Anya Hopkins;

<https://www.exploreyourarchive.org/chronicles-of-the-cairngorms-stories-from-the-shelter-stone-visitors-book/>

articles<sup>7</sup>, and lies about halfway up the south side of the Devil's Point. It is not visible until one is well up Glen Geusachan, being tucked into the west-facing wall of one of the many gullies on that hill-face. And it is not too easy of access, which requires first a rise through deepish heather and a small boulder field, and then some delicate upward traversing into the gully over slabs tessellated with thin lines of grass and heather. Once reached, it is just large enough to accommodate a body or two, albeit on a sloping floor, and exposed to the not-unusual westerly winds. Not a refuge to be sought in a storm!

### Creag Ghiubhais Cave

There are a number of theories regarding this cave – it may have been used as an explosive store by lumberjacks of the Newfoundlander Overseas Forestry Unit who worked in this area during the Second World War, and others talk of gem mining or a Pictish hideaway. It's a tunnel (6.1m long, 1.1 to 1.6m wide, and 1.1m high) halfway up a steep gully, with a pile of timber debris remaining outside which may have lined the floor and walls.

The approach was described by one club member as a trial "over some of the worst ground I have ever been on", with the other saying "ach, it's not that bad a bit rough" despite falling down holes up to his armpits on occasion.

### Balnamoon's Cave

This fine cave lies under a huge boulder a few miles up Glen Mark, on the north-facing hillside about 100m above the river – which can be hard to cross when the water is high but has some fine falls above and below the obvious crossing point. The cave mouth has been built up with stones to leave a narrow entrance, and the floor is remarkably bouldery: it is doubtful if many spend a night here! Balnamoon was the Jacobite James Carnegie, branded an outlaw following Culloden: unable to return home, he is said to have spent many months holed up here, with local people bringing him food and warnings about Government troops in the area.

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Cave on Bod an Diabhail', *CCJ* no. 68 (1929); a more successful (and exciting) expedition is described in 'Days on Devil's Point' by R. O. Mackay and J. B. McDonald, *CCJ* no. 82 (1941).

Rumour has it that the “real” cave may lie higher up amongst steeper ground, providing a better viewpoint to spot any approaching threat.

### Caves and Howffs on Ben a'Bhuird

The corries of this hill hold several shelters, of which the best known is the Smith-Winram bivouac, whose discovery and excavation is the subject of a classic account in the Club's annals<sup>8</sup>. It lies under a huge boulder directly below Dividing Buttress between Coire an Dubh Loch and Coire nan Clach Bhuird, and a stone wall protects its interior and contains its hatch-like entrance. Inside, it can hold two persons lying down, or one in rather more comfort, and it was the base for exploring climbing routes on the cliffs above, and no doubt in Garbh Choire over the shoulder to the north. Some smaller howffs are in the boulderfields nearby, with others in Coire an Dubh Loch and beside Dubh Lochaine. A through-cavity too small to be a howff lies on the rim of that corrie, and was apparently excavated by hunters of cairngorm stones in the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>.

### Clais Fhearnaig Cave

This sheltered pass formed by a glacial outflow channel will be familiar and regularly strolled by our members over the years, unaware of a nook high above. It took a tip-off from a knowledgeable Wanderer, and a dreich Sunday at Muir when bigger hills were out, to tempt our explorers to rummage over the upper rocky clefts of the pass. Our author initially scoped the rugged terrain and pondered “this could take all day and probably a few scrapes”, but Ivan Hiscox knocked that for six and opened his cave-finding account by finding it within 5 minutes.

### *Conclusions*

Discovering caves and howffs is good fun, and can be useful: as Andrew Nisbet has written, often “*The only accommodation is the howff, draughty*

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Be It Ever So Humble’, by Malcolm Smith, in *CCJ* no. 87 (1950-51), 169-173.

<sup>9</sup> See photograph in *Crystal Mountains : Minerals of the Cairngorms*, by Roy Starkey, Bromsgrove : British Mineralogical Publications (2014).

*and barely watertight, [but] as close to nature as you might wish*<sup>10</sup>. The activity often takes one well off the beaten tracks, and there is always the chance of finding a new location, and/or items left behind by earlier explorers. The better-known caves have legends attached; these can be chased up in literature searches during the winter evenings at home.

As we have accumulated too much information to share within the limits of this article, we provide further detail online – extra photos, exploration reports and a list of over 60 locations. Investigation of these will be ongoing for many years yet, so if you are interested in assisting please get in touch.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Cairngorm Climbing - a Contribution', by Andrew Nisbet, in *CCJ* no. 98 (1980), 3-13.

### Selected Cairngorms Caves and Howffs

The caves and howffs listed below are only some of those in the Cairngorms area; a longer list, with more information on many, is available at <https://cairngormclub.org.uk/caves>.

\* A legend is associated with this cave/howff \*\* Visited by one or both authors.

| <u>Cave/Howff Name</u>   | <u>Location (with OS grid ref.)</u> | <u>Notes</u>                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Balnamoon's Cave*, **    | Glen Mark (NO 3959 8326)            | Above meadow above Water of Mark rapids. Small caves in rocks around.                                               |
| Castle Wilson**          | Morven (NJ 3470 0570)               | At Slacks of Glen Carvie; more vertical than horizontal; not capacious.                                             |
| Cateran's Cave*, **      | Loch Esk (NO 2370 7950)             | In large boulders below a small crag, also a small howff with a slightly built-up wall lies across the nearby loch. |
| Colonel's Bed*, **       | Glen Ey (NO 087 872)                | Overhang in the gorge, still reachable despite collapse.                                                            |
| Colonel's Cave*, **      | Inverey (NO 0870 8870)              | Overhang at upper tree edge on Creag a' Chait; one person.                                                          |
| Creag Liath              | Speyside (NJ 0062 3138)             | Small rock shelter 3km NNW of Grantown on Spey, on S side of summit                                                 |
| Devil's Geusachan Cave** | Devil's Point (NN 972 948)          | On S face, facing W; small; sloping floor                                                                           |

|                           |                                |                                                                               |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fairn or Fearn Cave**     | Creag Ghiubhais (NO 3140 9560) | A natural cave, but excavated for store; difficult access ground              |
| Gryp's Chamber*, **       | Glen Lee (Esk) (NO 3960 7940)  | Difficult to find amongst overgrown boulder field. 1km WNW of Inchgrundle     |
| Harthill's Cave*, **      | Bennachie (NJ 6715 2336)       | 160m N of Craig Shannoch; entrance 0.79m but 1.36m inside                     |
| Hole o'Veerns*            | Glen Clova (NO 2950 7550)      | Large boulder cave 1km E of Braedownie. Holds 6-8 people.                     |
| Huntly's Cave (North)*    | Grantown (NJ 0469 3599)        | On the E side of Carr a' Ghille Chearr. Recess "at the left end of the crag". |
| Huntly's Cave(s) (South)* | Grantown (NJ 0248 3265)        | On the S side of Allt na Fhithich gorge. Another nearby at NJ 0256 3273?      |
| Laird's Chamber*          | Glen Clova                     | Small hollow 1km NW of Hotel. In outcrop rocks on S face of Ben Reid.         |
| Lochnagar Howff**         | Lochnagar Corrie (NO 252 864)  | Under large boulder; low; 2-person                                            |
| Lonavey's Cave*           | Carr an Righ                   | Has interesting tales of poachers evading capture. Said to be on Carr an Righ |
| Quartz-Diggers Cave**     | Coire Domhain (NH 999 019)     | Man-made tunnel at foot of route, Stag Rocks                                  |
| Shelter Stone**           | Loch Avon (NJ 0019 0159)       | Our well-known place of foundation. Other howffs nearby                       |

|                                |                                |                                                                    |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Smith-Dey<br>Bivouac**         | Braeriach (NN 947<br>985)      | In Garbh Coire Dhaidh, under large boulder; 2-person               |
| Vat or Gilderoy's<br>Cave*, ** | Loch Kinord (NO<br>4250 9961)  | Tiny cave behind waterfall                                         |
| Smith-Winram<br>Howff**        | Beinn a'Bhuird (NO<br>907 996) | Under a large boulder; 2-person; not "Freddie and Sticker's Howf"? |

## **The 1971 Cairngorm Disaster**

by Malcolm Duckworth

The late Sunday night telephone call in November was unlikely to be good news.

“ Hi Malcolm – Bill here, can you get to the garages with a full kit for what could be a long rescue”. This was to be my first rescue as a new team member from having agreed to volunteer in September and start training.

Bill Marshall the then leader and founder of Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team was assembling the team to travel to Glen Derry for a first light search. After gathering, Bill explained that a party of six school children and two adult leaders were missing somewhere in the Cairngorm and Ben Macdhui areas. It was conjectured that unless they had escaped to lower ground they may have endured two nights on the plateau in blizzard conditions. The group had also failed to locate a plateau level refuge known as the Curran Shelter.

The Aberdeen Team was tasked to search the upper Glen Derry, Loch Etchacan, Loch Avon basin and the Fords of Avon areas. The underfoot conditions were challenging with very deep unconsolidated snow. Progress was slower than expected and tiring. The blizzard had abated and overhead, ironically, was a clear blue sky. These search areas were selected as potential sites that the missing party may have descended to escaping the blizzard. Later that day we were stood down following the discovery of the missing party by an RAF rescue helicopter.

Five of the six children and one of the leaders had died and the tragedy became known as the ‘Cairngorm Disaster’. It is sometimes referred to as the ‘Feith Buidhe Disaster’ due to the proximity of this burn to their emergency bivouac site.

A fatal accident enquiry was held and this led to the requirement for formal qualifications being placed on teachers, youth workers and adventure organisations taking children into the mountains. In addition, wider safety and risk management structures were also implemented. It is well documented on the internet.





**Blà Bheinn and the Clach Glas Traverse**  
from Loch Scavaig  
(Peter Henry)

Within four years I found myself as the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team leader and heavily involved in the implementation of such qualification and risk management structures. It also became a period where along with my colleagues we worked on developing a high level of professionalism in Mountain Rescue.

The accident sparked pressure from various official bodies to have all the high-level shelters removed. Their basic argument being that they encouraged the less well prepared into the plateau. It was fiercely debated and eventually all the shelters were removed.

The weekend following the tragedy Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team was tasked with recovering the group's equipment from the Feith Buidhe area. An emotionally hard task. The rescue that day and the subsequent recovery of the group's equipment has stayed with me for over 50 years and very recently culminated in me writing a poem reflecting on the event.

#### Feith Buidhe

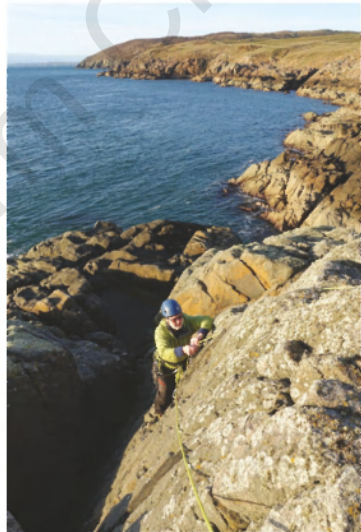
The darkening plateau  
hides the shelter  
and deceived innocents  
in sheltering contours  
are folded in the blizzard  
Hills stepped into darkness  
-a blackness beyond night  
and tears lost to the snow  
now burden our history  
Listen, to the west  
the Feith Buidhe  
below an icy carapace  
trickles a thousand sadnesses  
to the dark loch  
The mountains are still now.  
The plateau silent  
neath this infinite dome  
with a million stars scalpel-sharp  
and thoughts held in stillness  
Let me sing you a Gaelic anthem  
to their lost voices  
Beannachtd leibh

## A Galloway Renaissance

by Andrew Fraser

Your esteemed Editor, a native of Wigtown, asked for an article on recent developments in Galloway. At least I think that is what he wanted; one can never be sure? I am hoping the book town's sudden interest in ropes and the sea isn't to do with its history, maybe a re-enactment of the days when they tied unbelievers to stakes to await the incoming tide? Either way, I wasn't brave enough to decline your editor's invitation, although this is very much a personal, strictly without prejudice article.

Galloway climbing has been going through a bit of a renaissance in the last three years. If you have only climbed at Meikle Ross, Dungeon Hill and Clifton Craigs you may have concluded that Galloway hill crags are remote and guarded by floating bogs and immense tussocks, the sea-cliffs are greywacke of dubious quality and Clifton is the small but enticing exception which proves the rule. But this is no longer true and, with the publication of the first guidebook exclusively devoted to climbing in Dumfries and Galloway, we now have the damn lies and statistics to prove it. From a historical perspective, climbing in Galloway is very much a latecomer.



It reads like this: -

1970- 8 recorded climbs

1986 Central and Southern Scotland Guide - 176 climbs

1994 Lowland Outcrops Guide - 450 climbs

2004 Lowland Outcrops Guide -770 climbs

2026 Dumfries and Galloway Guide – 1700 climbs plus 400 online

The breakdown between different areas is: -

Galloway Hills - 652 climbs on 31 cliffs

Moffat and Clifton – 123 climbs on 7 crags

Galloway sea-cliffs - 1360 climbs on 28 crags

Some 55% of all routes are now on granite, or its nicer sibling diorite, granite without the blank bits, giving face holds and better gear. 45% of all climbs are now on the Stranraer peninsula facing towards Ireland, known as The Rhins. As late as 1985 there were only two recorded climbs on the Rhins, but Crammag Head alone now boasts more climbs than Dungeon Hill, Meikle Ross and Clifton combined. And importantly for the purposes of this article, 30%, or more than 600, of the climbs date from 2022-2025.

So, what has been going on and why? The simple answer is that the Rhins sea-cliffs were re-discovered, particularly the small Portencorkrie granite and diorite intrusion north of Scotland's southernmost point at the Mull of Galloway. A real or paranoid imagined rivalry between the new guide's two authors, Stephen Reid and myself, also plays a part. I have been climbing in Galloway for 50 years, Stephen for 35 and over that period we have each done about 10 new routes a year, adding up to about half the area's climbs. Stephen has been a great fan of the Galloway hills and its granite, does not care for greywacke sea-cliffs and, importantly, is based in Cumbria, making the Rhins granite out of his day trip range, at least in theory. Left to his own devices Stephen would Hoover up all the unclimbed rock in the Galloway hills. Worse, he could rely on the technical proficiency of Chris King for the harder stuff. From my perspective this meant the sea-cliffs were safe from his depredations as he was allergic to any greywacke cliff within his range, and the Rhins granite was safely out of range. As the immediate threat was therefore in the hills, for 20 years Ian Magill and I devoted our time to safeguarding the remaining unclimbed Galloway hill rock from him. Stephen's perspective was identical, he correctly spotted that left to my own devices I would Hoover up all the remaining unclimbed rock in the hills. And so, like ships in the night, in successive waves of development we each climbed in secret on cliffs in close proximity to each other, sometimes on the same hill: Dungeon Hill v Tauchers, Corwar v Craigdews, Memorial Crag v Point of the Snibe and at opposite ends of the Craignelder escarpment. By 2021 we had run out of road, there was nothing new in the hills which we could climb, a mutual opinion as we were now climbing together. A new guide was also in the offing which would require photo-diagrams. Stephen, as editor of the Frock Club's climbing guides, had the foresight to realise this was the future and for 20 years had been patiently collecting photos for his inland sections of the guide. I had not. Interesting challenges resulted, such as perching on offshore rocks to get wide-angle sea-cliff photos, all the time

juggling light conditions, the time of day and the state of the tide. But as a recidivist new router my eye was continually drawn to the gaps, of which there were many.

In particular, it appeared Crammag Head, arguably the nicest and most developed of the Portencorkrie igneous crags, had no less than 15 unclimbed sectors. How could we have missed so much when we developed the crag in 1992? Well, in retrospect, the original development was against a deadline of 'last orders' for the forthcoming guidebook. I also think we dismissed certain crags as too easy which, with the benefit of increasing age and decrepitude, proved better and harder. It was now obvious that at my normal rate of 10 routes per annum I could easily see out the rest of climbing days. Unfortunately, in April 2022 the Fell and Rock Club organised a meet to the Rhins, Stephen repeatedly asking me the question of 'is there anything on that wall'. Well-honed lawyer evasion skills could only take me so far. That year Stephen developed the south side of Crammag's Kittiwake Zawn, while Ian and I recorded 20 routes elsewhere on the crag, the highlights of which were Forked Lightning Wall (HVS), one of those lines which you can't quite believe remained hidden in plain sight, plus Alpine Dunman, a four-pitch severe on Dunman, the hill overlooking Crammag and a pun on Alpine Binmen.

2023 saw development starting in earnest at Crammag. Whenever we dropped down to sea-level a new unclimbed wall appeared, always of impeccable diorite and climbable on sight. We were joined by Max Twomey, who, with the perpetually young Stuart Lampard, had just developed the northernmost granite hill crag of Craighmasheenie. Max was charitably, and to our eyes, dangerously, welcoming of others to his developments and in turn he pulled in others from the Kilmarnock Climbing Wall, particularly Rachel and George. Stuart the Postie even returned to rock. Development started in Crammag South, then to the north wall of Viking Zawn which went from an existing 4 routes to 26. Hourglass Walls south, Gabarunning north and south, The Headland, Point of the Barb and Sloucheen Slunk followed in quick succession. Stephen, with military efficiency (his father was a colonel), had now organised a billet with the Kinnairds in Dalbeattie. This brought the crag into his daily orbit, albeit with some very late drives back to Cumbria.

Crammag is exposed to south-westerlies and in September 2023 there was a run of such winds. On a coast walk the previous year I had spotted Salt Pans Bay, on the northern Rhins. I was keeping it for my old age until John Biggar posted a photo of an interesting geological feature near Salt Pans Bay. John had checked the Salt Pans Bay north of Portobello and found nothing. He enquired if anyone knew anything? As I hadn't seen the actual cliff in his post I feigned ignorance, while knowing the crag would lie in the other Salt Pans Bay south of Portobello. Stephen then pointed John to the existence of the other Salt Pans Bay, and I sheepishly recanted. Luckily, John and Linda got the first climbs, until 'the usual suspects' (as Roger Everett's monthly SMC new route blog likes to refer to us ageing prima-donnas) moved in. It now has 31 climbs on prime quality greywacke, giving the typical off-vertical small edge climbing so typical of that rock.

As winter set in, we discovered that not only does the sun always shine at Crammag, on a cold day of easterly winds the west coast can be a sun-trap. In December Max and I strolled north from Crammag lighthouse to waste time on a section of cliff I had previously overlooked. New eyes, armed with the knowledge that any rock would be perfect quality diorite duly found Norway Craig. That winter we found there were lots of smaller, easier crags perfect for shorter, colder days. Like Reiff but warmer. Point of the Cleugh, the central of the Portencorkrie crags and the only one which is genuine granite, saw a quick makeover early in the new year, and from having 4 routes in 2020, it now has 50.

If Crammag had proved so receptive to our charms, surely the largest diorite crag of Laggantalluch to the north would reward a visit? In 1991 I had done a couple of routes in the southernmost bays nearest the road and recent photos showed room for one or two more. Craigs of the Stone Dyke then provided another 38 climbs, courtesy of 'the usual suspects'. While Ian Magill and I were ticking our way through this crag, Max, George and Rachel were developing The Portal at Norway Craig. I arrived late to this show, only to unaccountably puncture a lung in an 8m fall. The honourable thing would have been for everyone to cease development at these crags, since I had both found the crag and reserved it by towel. Needless to say, by the time I got back it boasted 90 routes, only 5 of which involved me.



*The Editor gets stuck into Bittersweet Nothings (HVS) at Point of the Cleugh*

Nevertheless, I still had more topo photos and top of my list was the left wall of Laggantalluch's Foam Zawn, one of the crag's tallest cliffs but one guarded by a complex abseil. This gave Stephen, Ian and I five good routes, the best being Stephen's Huntingtower (HVS) and my Diorite Dreams (VS). Later, on a slowly drying day, after Stephen had manfully led Greenmantle (HVS), the two of us plus Linda Biggar checked out the coast between Craigs of the Stone Dyke and Small Bay.



*Linda Biggar on Greenmantle (HVS) at Laggantalluch Head*

This, now called the Stacs Area, was an ideal winter venue. It won't make the guide but is online with 62 smaller routes. On the odd day when strong south-westerlies closed these crags a number of climbs were also done at the Lookout near Dumfries and at Larbrax, the latter having one of the nicest beaches around. Mossyard near Gatehouse of Fleet, is another spot noted for its excellent beach. Al Halewood, on a canoeing trip, found a small crag to the west which is perfect for those starting a journey into trad climbing, both in terms of grades and gear.

March 2025 saw Ian and I climbing on Crammag's northernmost cliff. Temperatures were cold and I had reverted to my 20-year-old large Scarpa Marathons. The entire heel of a shoe fell off, and had to be held in place by a cable tie punched through a hole in the heel. Spookily, an old OS map then revealed the crag already had a name: Hole of the Heel.

As for the future, current developments show an interesting trend. Max, Stuart the Postie and Rachel have been exploring the hill of Dunman which overlooks Crammag, adding the seven pitch Alpine Burning (VS) amongst others. Ian and I have been developing the crags between Scarty Head and Dun Rock, to the north of Money Head, now with 32 routes. Both cliffs are of very compact, good quality greywacke, lie immediately adjacent to igneous intrusions and it appears the rock has been cooked by proximity to the volcanic activity. If this holds true, there are other bits of the coast which will fall into the same category.

So, exciting times and hopefully the new guide will make people realise what a wealth of fun climbing in the area can now provide. While it can seem far away from the main centres of population, if you factor in a 10-minute approach, your total time from house to crag starts to look more reasonable. And, as global warming threatens to impact on Scottish winter climbing, bear in mind it is possible to rock climb in Galloway all year round. Drummore has as many hours of sunshine as Tiree and is warmer and a lot less windy. Or for those who believe that winter only means ice, the new guide will also reveal that the Black Gairy of the Merrick is a giant Beinn Udlaidh, fed by springs.



*Stephen Reid and Linda Biggar on Nothing venture, Nothing Rhin (HVS),  
Stacs Area, Laggantalluch*



*The cooked greywacke of Scarty Head- Andrew Fraser and Stephen Reid  
on Molten Gold VS*



*The usual suspects (John Biggar, Ian Magill, Max Twomey, Stephen Reid and Andrew Fraser) at Crammag.*

## Reflections on Mountain Leader Assessment

by Grant Signorini

Almost a year to the day after completing my Mountain Leader training, I walked through the doors of Glenmore Lodge where I'd be based for my Mountain Leader assessment. My North Face duffel felt heavy, though not nearly as heavy as the anxiety I carried with it.

Sat alone in my room, I unpacked and organised my gear. Efficiency is a core quality of a Mountain Leader, and although turning up late on day one would not mean failure, I knew first impressions mattered. That night I barely slept. My mind replayed ropework and navigation scenarios in an endless loop.

### First Steps on the Hill

After introductions and a briefing, we were driven to the Sugar Bowl car park where the assessment began. The assessor asked who would take the first navigation leg. Expecting something straightforward, I volunteered. My target was a stream junction less than a kilometre away. Though nerves made me second-guess each step, I arrived with a sense of relief.

The navigation challenges steadily increased as we circled back to Glenmore via Allt Coire an t-Sneachda and Allt Mor. At one stream we paused to discuss group management during a crossing. When asked if we would have participants remove their packs, we gave the textbook response: yes, to avoid entanglement should



someone fall. The assessor's blunt reply stuck with me: "I wouldn't let any of you take my kids out. If you need to consider that risk, you shouldn't be crossing." It was a sharp reminder that judgement matters more than textbook responses.

## **Steep Ground and Ropework**

Another restless night was followed by assessment on steep ground in the Chalamain Gap. On the way from Glenmore Lodge, the assessor's frequent "Where are we now?" kept us constantly alert. Now in the steep sided gap, it was time to demonstrate proficient use of the rope to safeguard group members during a steep descent and abseil oneself to secure ground. Fortunately, countless evenings spent tying knots to door handles at home, along with cold days spent with fellow Club member Guy Bromby preparing for his Winter Mountain Leader, paid off. Ropework felt natural, a small island of confidence in an otherwise demanding week.

## **The Expedition**

After the ritual of public pack weighing in the kit room at Glenmore (my practice expeditions helped me avoid embarrassment), we set out for the multi-day expedition. The plan was to reach Faindouran Lodge via Bynack More, demonstrating navigation, leadership, and the ability to bring the mountain environment alive for the group through flora and fauna knowledge.

Fog rolled in just as I began my leg to the summit of Bynack More. Even simple navigation legs weighed heavy on my mind - the fear of failure hanging over me. But, after a short while, we made it to the summit. I briefly relaxed as I took shelter behind a rock and enjoyed the warm feeling of unpacking my lunch. Later, tasked with navigating from a stream junction to a nipple on the North side of Dagrur, nerves got the better of me. I set off without a clear plan and soon realised I was losing control. The assessor spotted it instantly. When I suggested diverting to the prominent top and navigating from there, he told me firmly to continue on the efficient line. Forced to focus, I read slope and aspect with absolute concentration (and a sinking feeling in my stomach).



To my surprise - and relief - we arrived precisely where intended.

That evening, a hot meal and the comfort of my sleeping bag felt richly deserved.

## Night Navigation

The second day was long, split between a day hike to Beinn a' Bhuird and culminating in night navigation from a bothy to the small bridge crossing the River Nethy. Blind legs required vigilance, as they had throughout the assessment. Blind legs involve only the navigator being told where to take the group, and the others having to identify where they have been taken to once the leg is complete, one-by-one informing the assessor in private.

My navigation practice with Guy - often venturing out of our tent at 22:00 and returning at 03:00 - proved invaluable. I knew there'd be a time where stumbling around on Ben Macdui in the early hours in thick fog for 'fun' would come in useful. And it did. Each leg went well, and I could confidently say "we are here".

## Results and Reflection

By the final morning, the cumulative effect of poor sleep, constant movement, and the stress of assessment left me drained. The slog back to Glenmore was followed by a welcome shower and the inevitable wait in the bar for results.

When my name was called, I walked in with a tight chest and racing thoughts. The verdict: I had passed. Relief was the overriding emotion - not celebration, simply the release of pressure.

Looking back, several lessons stand out. First, the importance of judgment over textbook answers - mountain leadership demands more than technical knowledge.

Second, preparation matters: countless hours of practice with navigation and ropework proved their worth.

Finally, resilience is tested as much as skill; staying calm when plans falter is perhaps the most valuable leadership quality of all.



The experience was far from easy, but that was the point. The Mountain Leader Assessment is not just about navigation or knots; it is about carrying responsibility for others in complex terrain and under pressure.

And one question will remain etched in my memory: "Where are we now?" A simple phrase, but one that defines the essence of leadership in the hills - always knowing, always ready, always aware.

The Cairngorm Club

## My First Trip to the Alps

by Helen Russell

This trip was long awaited as I had first booked several years previously, but it was thwarted by Covid. I was particularly nervous given the length of time I had to think about it, especially as I had never climbed above 2000 metres and I had no idea how I would cope at altitude.

I booked a course called the Swiss 4000ers with Frost Guiding based in Evolene in the Arolla Valley, Switzerland, and as advised arrived in August, a few days early to help get acclimatised. The Arolla valley, unlike other Alpine centres, does not have a ski lift infrastructure, so every trip included at least a 1000m climb to get to any of the mountain huts.



The first day took me up to the Aiguilles Rouges hut – a relatively easy 1350m climb through lovely alpine meadows and then a glorious descent route via the Lac Bleu.

The second day took me above Evolene and after climbing another 1000m, and on the way back I found myself in a beautiful village called La Sage. I came upon a multitude of blue butterflies on the path and a grasshopper that let me take a good photo of him. The restaurant I visited was full of locals having Sunday lunch and I was treated to the most beautiful

looking and wonderful Gazpacho soup!

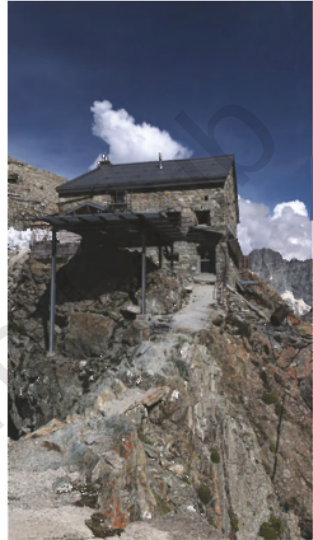
On Sunday evening I met the other guests and guides. Many of the guests had been there before so it was good to listen to their

experiences. The chalet was hosted and we were very well looked after including lots of home baked scones and cakes on our return from our trips during the week.

The first trip took us up to the Vignette Hut (3160m) reached by an ascent from Arolla Village.

The setting of Vignette Hut is spectacular as it sits on a glacier, on the Haute Route and requires a glacier crossing (my first) to access it.

The first objective the following day was the Pigne D'Arolla (3787m) and required a 5am rise. The early start was in the dark with head torches and the need for wearing crampons was disconcerting. I realise now that it was mainly due to the fact that the light on my headtorch was poor and I had little visibility.



As a result I am sure I was hyperventilating for the first twenty minutes! Fortunately, the next section was an easy bare-rock scramble, so it gave me time to calm down before the next steep ice section which required us to be roped up and our guide had to insert a few ice screws. This part of the climb was exhilarating, the ice so solid that it was difficult to insert an ice axe into so we had to rely on front pointing to climb up it.



Ascents in the Alps are a tale of two worlds: mountainous, majestic snow covered and awe inspiring with full winter gear; followed by the contrast of alpine valleys and very hot and sweaty descents!

And so to plan our next trip of the week. Filled with tea and cake we decided to opt for a trip to the Almageller hut to climb Weissmies (4013m). The plan was to stay two

nights there and do an easier climb the first day before embarking on the Weissmies traverse. August is a good month to walk in the Alps; however, it is prone to afternoon thunderstorms and despite an early rise from the hut the next day, we saw one coming in the distance. Our guide hurried us up the peak and I found myself stressed, scrambling at speed. We got off the peak and then walked back along difficult ground for about three hours. I experienced real primal fear when a bolt of lightning was quickly followed by a booming crack of thunder. We got off the mountain safely but I was in shock and it took an afternoon of sleep to recover from it. I also doubted my ability to do the climb the next day, but fortunately, my guide and the others persuaded me to go for it and we had a very successful climb.

Weissmeis starts with a walk in the dark. This was very atmospheric as it is a popular mountain and we were accompanied by a trail of 30-40 climbers, along with their guides, slowly making their way up the mountain in torchlight. There is then an 800 metre scramble which was very enjoyable and not too difficult, followed by a short glacier section to the top. The feeling of reaching the summit was incredible and I felt very happy to have achieved it despite my doubts the night before.



The descent was equally spectacular down and along a 1000m glacier. We travelled roped up and found that there was an art in travelling together that required everyone to walk at the same speed. We were almost down and our guide told us that we should be relatively quick in the next section as the midday heat was liable to cause melting of the corrie below and cause avalanches. Just before we were about to descend into this section we watched a huge expansive part of the ice wall of the corrie break off and create an avalanche. We watched the climbers below run off the path to avoid it. Once again I was reminded of the dangerous terrain we were in, despite the fact that I had an excellent guide supporting me. We were very thankful to see the cable car station when we got down, especially when we could congratulate ourselves with a beer in the cafe. My trip was almost over after conquering

Weissmeis, with only one day left and we were treated to a via ferrata (Via Farinetta, Saillon) to complete the trip. Not as intense as the mountains but very enjoyable even with some shaky legs crossing a steel wire bridge over the gorge.

As a first trip to the Alps I think it was a great choice and despite some scares it was worth every minute and I look forward to the opportunity to do it again.

## The Life of William McGillivray

by Ken Thomson

William MacGillivray FRSE (25 January 1796 – 4 September 1852) was a Scottish naturalist and ornithologist, born in Old Aberdeen but brought up on Harris. He returned to King's College Aberdeen where he graduated MA in 1815, and then studied Medicine. Each summer vacation he would walk from Aberdeen to the west coast (at least once over Braeriach, sleeping in the Garbh Choire) to catch a boat to his home on Harris. To further his knowledge of natural history, he visited the British Museum in London, making the return journey from Aberdeen on foot, "with ten pounds in his pocket, a drinking glass, and a trowel". He then worked in Edinburgh on anatomy and natural history before moving in 1841 to become Professor of Natural History at Marischal College, Aberdeen. In that post, he introduced the hitherto unheard-of idea of taking students out on field trips.

MacGillivray was a friend of the American bird expert J. J. Audubon, and wrote a large part of Audubon's *Ornithological Biographies* from 1830 to 1839. Audubon named MacGillivray's warbler for him.

Amongst other books, he was the author of the magisterial *The Natural History of Dee Side and Braemar*, in which he describes his walks up and down the whole of Deeside and its upper tributaries, observing the rocks and landscape, and listing several hundred species of (mainly) plants. Unpublished at the time of his death, the manuscript was purchased by Queen Victoria, who had a limited edition printed in 1855.



As may be gathered, MacGillivray was a prodigious walker. Chapter X (pp. 85-94) in *Natural History* describes his ascent of "the great mountains at the sources of the Dee" (editor's comments in [square brackets]):

"At five of the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of August [of 1850] we joined the Messrs. Backhouse [of a famous naturalist family] at the inn [in Braemar], and in about half-an-hour commenced our journey. To save time and unnecessary labour we were conveyed to the Linn of Dee, a distance of seven miles. Traversing the Pine woods for about two miles, we came to an open grassy strath nearly three miles in length; and on passing it, observed a gamekeeper's house on the edge of a wood [location unclear; a "hunting lodge" was built on the Derry Lodge site in the early nineteenth century]. At this, the only human habitation in Glen Lui, we obtained some milk and information, both useful for our further progress. ... At the distance of about two miles from the cottage, we entered Glen Dee ... Passing the Guisachan, we proceed toward the base of Cairntoul, and, fording the stream, beside which we find abundance of *Arabis petraea* [Northern rock-cress], and *Alchemilla alpina* [Alpine lady's mantle], in the bed of the Dee, we forthwith ascend the steep acclivity, keeping as near as we can to the brook which comes gliding and rushing down from a corry high on the mountain. Many interesting plants are met with, especially *Hieracia* [hawkweeds], and the largest "blue-bells" I have ever seen, displayed their cerulean charms on the banks of the stream.

The ascent was difficult; but at length we reached a space entirely covered with great blocks of granite, passing over which with comparative ease, we entered a spacious corry, of a semicircular form, with fissured crags, and steep stony slopes. ... Emerging, as it were, into open space, and inhaling the cool air with delight, we now found ourselves on the back of the mountain, across which we proceeded toward a ridge that overlooked the Glen of the Garrachory ... and ... descended by a steep slope of detritus into a corry immediately below ... This ... is separated from the Glen of the Garrachory by a high rocky bank, along which we descended with great difficulty and some danger [and] moved downwards toward Ben-na-muic-dhui.

[Then follows a long discussion on glaciers and moraines in the area, but "some Midges (species of *Tipulae*) made a desperate attack upon us"!]

We ascended slowly by a very steep hollow, down which came a necessarily very rapid stream, and found ourselves on a stony shoulder of the mountain. ... After a walk of about half-a-mile over

sand and granite slabs, gravel and rough stones, we arrived at the centre of the broad top, and seating ourselves on the base of the pyramidal cairn of the Trigonometers, made our evening meal. It was eight o'clock: a thick mist suddenly covered the mountains, and enveloped us in its aerial mantle.

Not at all dismayed, we found by our compasses the direction in which we ought to proceed [and] directed our course eastward, descended over a long tract of very stony ground, passed some melting snow wreaths, disturbed a large flock of Ptarmigans, and passing round the head of Glen Lui Beg, crossed a stony place to a hollow between two hills, expecting to find an easy descent into the valley of the Derry. But by this time it was so dark that we could not have guided ourselves with safety among the rocks and stones of the very steep declivity down which we gazed. Turning away from it, therefore, we ascended a hill [presumably Creagan a' Choire Etchachan] entirely covered with large stones, passed on westward, and found a gradual slope leading to the valley. All this long slope, however, was covered either with stones or long heath, interspersed with plashy spots and intersected by streams. ... Heather is detestable in darkness; you never know where to place your foot, but push on at random; and often when you suppose your next step is to be nearly on the level of the last, you come down into a hole two feet deep, or usually less, with a jerk that shakes your whole system, or you knock against a bush, or projecting piece of turf, and in the next instant are prostrate. ... It would be tedious to describe, and more so to read, an account of our most fatiguing descent into the Derry. It seemed as if it would never terminate; but down we did get at last; and then we plunged into the stream, and on the other side searched for a path, but found none. We did not reach Castleton [of Braemar] till three o'clock in the morning."

Another excursion, on 16 August 1850, is described as follows:

"On the 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1850, we crossed the Dee in the ferry-boat, and proceeding through the woods, entered Glen Candlic ["Glen" uncertain, but presumably nowadays Glen Slugain; Inverchandlick Cottage stands on the north bank of the Dee, opposite the confluence of Clunie Water], where we found a made path in excellent order, which we followed to opposite the nearer corry of Benabuid. ... The dying and dead Birches observed in 1819, attracted our attention to-day. The same plants were met with, and the berries of the *Vaccinium* [shrubs such as the blaeberry] were equally irresistible. ... A game-keeper's house has been built at the head of the glen. We had not proceeded far beyond it when we were overtaken by a man who informed us that at this season, visitors are prohibited from proceeding further. But after some civil talk between him and Mr. Backhouse, who gave our names to present, with our respects, to the Duke, he made no further objection, and only requested us to keep to the left, which we did. Visits like ours are certainly an annoyance to the deerstalker, who, I should think, is quite justified in preventing them, especially in the commencement of the shooting season. But, not knowing the law of the case, and assuming that a naturalist has a right to go where he chooses, unless formally prohibited, I never hesitate to visit any piece of unenclosed land, although I should always avoid disturbing the game on it.

Crossing the heath, where many fine Lichens, especially *Cetraria Islandica* (Iceland moss), *C. nivalis* [snow lichen], and numerous forms of *Scyphophorus* [snout and bark beetles] occurred, we passed at a distance from Coire-nan-clach, specimens of which, however, we met with in the form of some enormous blocks which had far outrolled their neighbours. Mr. Backhouse junior, and I, entered the second corry, that of the Dhuloch, while our friends went on to search for the Saxifrage. The plants which I noted there are: [list of 34]. ... Having met our friends near the Dhuloch, we descended the valley by its eastern side, along which the hills extend a little beyond the extremity of Benabuid. Then crossing in an easterly direction some low ground, succeeded by a rounded eminence, we came in sight of the deep cleft, somewhat rocky on both sides, which separates a large hill appended to Ben-Ann, from a lower hill [i.e. Cam Liath, presumably, with upper Glen Gairn in between] stretching about three miles south-eastward. The rocky faces

of the cleft are named the Great, or Mickle, and Little Craigandal. The bare moor which we traversed was in some places very productive of Lichens, of which many were collected. While resting on the eminence mentioned, we observed on the opposite hill of the Little Craigandal about two hundred Deer moving slowly along the declivity. Crossing the little valley which intervened, we ascended the hill, and, judging by appearances, directed our course towards the station of *Astragalus alpinus* [alpine milkvetch], which we accordingly found.

Among the grassy herbage intermixed with many common plants, it presented itself in great abundance, but not very conspicuously, although many individuals were still in flower. ... One cannot guess the reason of their preferring this spot, the hill being of little elevation, and not obviously different from those near it, which are of quartzose mica-slate. The plants observed here were: [list of 27 plants]. We had another view of the Deer, which had descended the hollow and turned into the pass. Proceeding southward by the ridge of the hill, we saw an Eagle soaring over the side of Ben-Aun, and heard a Raven croaking in the same direction." (pp. 127-130).

The final main chapter (XXXV) in *Natural History* describes MacGillivray's return to Aberdeen, starting from Kincardine O'Neill after lunch. He went by Potarch Bridge and the Bridge of Feugh (reached at six o'clock) and the South Deeside Road to Maryculter, where he at last obtained some tea and bread. He then crossed the Dee, passing "the shapeless mass of Holborn Church and the somewhat fantastic building of the Free Church College" to go down Union Street "near twelve", to his home in King Street.

Some other quotations from *Natural History*:

"But well may we be assured that the spirit who wanders unhappy amid the bowers of paradise is under a curse, and that he who feels no inspiration of love and peace on the mountain-summit, where everything around, beneath, and above, whispers of the Eternal, is as yet unfit for heaven" (p.22).

"Who could paint that distant mountain, rising in stern majesty over the peaks of yon range of green hills, its scarred front glaring dim in the sunshine that casts its fissures into deep shade! A magnificent mass, truly, is Lochnagar, as many a one has felt and said before now. It may

not be the king of the Scottish mountains, but at this moment, at least, when it presents its massive form before me, I am almost willing to accord it that pre-eminence.” (p.32).

“Some of the blocks which have fallen from the precipices [of “Ben-na-muic-dhui” above “Loch Aun”] are of enormous size. One of them, probably ten yards in diameter, has settled so as to leave a large cavity beneath, which shepherds have rudely walled up, so as to convert it into a cave capable of containing about twenty persons.” (p.110).

“There is, in truth, little of the picturesque, and nothing of the magnificent, in Glen-Gairn” (p.203).

“Of the fissures or rents by which the great precipice [of “Lochan-a-ghar”] is scarred, the largest of all, commencing not far from the eastern peak or summit, may be descended to the base of the rocks, and into the hollow of the corry. ... The crags in this place ascend almost perpendicularly to appearance, so that a person looking on them from below could hardly believe them to be accessible to human feet; and, certainly, to the uninitiated it would seem little less than madness to attempt such rifts and crags as those among which many of the best alpine plants are wont to occur. Two sedate elderly gentlemen, little apt to be sent astray by impulses of enthusiasm, clinging with their hands to the face of a precipice five hundred feet high, in a place two hundred feet from the base, — and this risk incurred for the mere chance of finding a few rare plants that few people care much about — one can hardly designate it by any other name than Phytomania”. (pp.61-63).

## Alta Via 2

by Martina Rooney

As Alta Via 1 is rather popular these days, only 7-10 days in duration and with few via ferrate, Alta Via 2 (AV2), from Brixen/Bressanone to Feltre, was the choice for me in the summer of 2025. My plan was to split the 174km route into 13 stages, with some allowances for semi-rest days, extra via ferrate or bad weather. Accommodation is plentiful along the route, allowing for any hut-to-hut tour you may wish to embark on. I managed to get all my beds booked in March, with only two slight deviations from my original plan. I carried two Cicerone guides with me, one on Alta Via 2 (which includes GPX downloads) and another on Via Ferrata in the Italian Dolomites, Vol 2.



Via ferrata, translated as iron path or way, developed during World War 1 as a means of transporting soldiers through the Dolomites. Using metal cables, metal rungs (stemles) and ladders, soldiers used rudimentary materials to pass from one area to another. What started as a means of protecting the Italian borders, is now a modern leisure activity, which allows those with relatively little climbing experience to visit rather inaccessible areas.

After flying into Milan, there is a four hour train trip north to Brixen/Bressanone, with a change in Verona (maybe a chance to make a stopover and head to the opera?). A note that Brixen is a German-speaking area, which is quite a shock to the system when you have to start thinking about 'bitte' and 'danke' instead of 'per favore' and

'grazie!' This is also why the town has two names, Brixen being the German name and most widely used by locals. The town itself is lovely, well worth an afternoon of exploring. I recommend staying in a hotel which offers the local tourist card, as it includes local public transport and a trip in the Plose cable car, a saving of €25 and 1000m of ascent. Furthermore, you can have the last pizza for the next two weeks in the highly rated Pizzeria Rossl, which is based in the Hotel Goldenes Rossl, where I stayed and recommend.

Day 1 for me started with a torrential downpour. Thankfully, I was having breakfast at the time but it did nothing to encourage the start of the holiday and did away with the planned early start. Nonetheless, the weather did abate and the waterproofs were removed. The 1000 metres ascent up the Plose cable car was a joy and then the real work began.

A thoroughly enjoyable day to start, with a tough, unrelenting 450m ascent up Forcella de Putia, but what views we were treated to the top! There is an option to add on an ascent of Sass de Putia (2875m). Next is a splendid 30 minute stroll to Rifugio Genova hut, however I stayed slightly further on at Gampen Alm, which involved an extra 300m ascent straight out the door the next morning. The next few days were filled with glorious views, each one surpassing the last, each day a new tough, unrelenting ascent and descent. But the views! Spectacular. My sister joined me for week



1 of the adventure and we soon approached our first via ferrata of the trip. This was a first for her and she absolutely powered through. We had a few semi-rest days where we had some extra via ferrate planned. Unfortunately on one route (Piz da Cir V, grade 2A) we, and many others, got stuck behind a gentleman who kept taking very long breaks and wasn't letting people pass. We missed out on some more adventures that day, but managed to get to our rifugio just in time to make dinner, after yet another super steep ascent (450m) and aided section. We also tackled via

ferrata Brigata Tridentina, graded 3B, from Rifugio Pisciadu , arguably one of the best via ferrata in the Dolomites.

A highlight for us was a few days later staying at Campanna Piz Fassa, a tiny, rustic hut on the summit of Piz Boé at 3152m. We woke up early to witness the sunrise over the Marmolada, queen of the Dolomites, Italy's highest point at 3342m. Then it snowed! We were kicked out of the rifugio at 8.30am and made slow progress to the precariously perched Rifugio Forcella Pordoi, which really was in a spectacular situation. A nearby cable car saved our knees and whisked us down to Passo Pordoi where we visited a WW2 museum and then approached the Viel de Pan, again an absolute highlight of the trip. This is at a much lower altitude and you share the path with many others. The Marmolada is always there keeping you company as you wander along, admiring the alpine meadows and flowers. We stayed in Rifugio Viel de Pan, at which only a few hikers overnighted and had a blast of an evening, dining outside in the sun, below the Marmolada, making new friends and sharing stories. For the past few days we had shared the path with several Germans attempting all or part of the Venice-Munich path, but the next day the routes diverged.



Our plans, however, involved a 4B via ferrata della Trincee, although once we got there with our tired bodies and heavy bags, we knew our hearts were not in it on the day. So down the hill we went to Rifugio Castiglioni and decided to head to nearby Malga Ciapela and get the cable car to the top of the Marmolada, which was an absolute treat. The next day I sadly said goodbye to my sister as she took a bus to Venice to fly home.

The hike from Malga Ciapela to Passo San Pellegrino was one of the absolute toughest of the trip for me. Over 7 km there was over 1000m of ascent. Now walking alone, I pushed myself way too hard and really struggled up to Forca Rossa, with my heavy bag.

Carrying a harness, via ferrata lanyard and helmet really adds weight to your pack. Nevertheless, I was treated to stunning alpine meadows and flowers, walking through fields of horses. When I reached the next hamlet I downed an apfelschorle, a refreshing mix of sparking water and apple juice, just what an exhausted hiker



needs. A hotel was booked for that night, in Passo San Pellegrino, with a welcome shower and private room. The next day I met a group from the Manchester area, a younger couple with the man's father and wife and I spent the rest of my trip with them.



Whilst I enjoyed the first week of the Alta Via 2, the second week was a different beast. We moved from the Sella to the Pale di San Martino mountains, meaning more karst landscapes, fewer people, much rougher ground and lots of scree descents. Progress was slow this week, with one 9 km stretch taking us over 6

hours to cover. Nonetheless, we had a great time, including walking some very dodgy ground with massive drops on either side during a thunder and lightning storm, and crossing raging torrents that instantly appeared. Our clothes did not dry out for days, but most of us had smiles on our faces at the end. There were more via ferrate conquered, card games played and wine drank, although I was rather sick of polenta at this stage. In the rifugio's, if you choose the half board option, a 3-course evening meal is included. The first course is soup or pasta, with polenta and mushrooms or pork as main. However, a trick is to ask if you can have hearty soup for your starter and the pasta for your main. I remember doing this one night and being presented with a mountain of spaghetti Bolognese. Everyone

was eyeing my meal with jealousy as they tucked into yet another portion of polenta, and I ate every last bite of my pasta.

Whilst I had previous via ferrata experience in the Dolomites and Zillertal alps, I was surprised with the number of people who had neither via ferrata nor climbing experience and just purchased their hardware for this trip, or even didn't bring any equipment. Whilst you can get away with alternative routes, or climbing some of the aided stretches without equipment in the first week, you absolutely need equipment, and preferably experience, for the second week. Even hiking through some of the scree sections I was very happy to be wearing my helmet in case of a rockfall, or even if I fell. It also lightened my backpack, which was handy.

Unfortunately, the weather took a turn for the worse at the very end of my trip and I missed out on the last two days. I was sad not to complete the route, but I do hope to return in the distant future and experience this epic adventure again. For me, this route really had it all. Excellent hiking, fun via ferrate, superb food and cheap wine, and amazing company and new friends made along the way. Be warned, this is not an easy hike, with ~174km, ~11,600m ascent/descent and unavoidable via ferrate. But with appropriate research, planning and a few rest days built in here and there, and the occasional cable car, you really can have an amazing time.



## Work, Rest and Play in the Cuillin

by Adrian Trendall



*"Blue hour" view over Bidein to the Northern Cuillin with Bruach na Frithe in the clouds on left, Basteir Tooth and Am Basteir centre and Sgùrr nan Gilleann right*

Those of a certain age may well remember the advert for Mars bars with the tag line, "A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play." Maybe it was a bit nonsensical, probably they wouldn't get away with such claims nowadays, but my relationship with the Cuillin is all-embracing, involving work, rest and play.

Living in Glen Brittle at the foot of the Black Cuillin, with my wife Bridgette, wild horses wouldn't drag us to any other location anywhere in the world.

For us, it's all about location. The Cuillin is just a stone's throw away, the beach and the sea are within easy reach, and we enjoy mountain views from the house.



Let's kick off with work which largely involves guiding people in the Black Cuillin. However, work and play are largely intertwined and work never really feels like work since it's pretty much what I'd be doing for play. I'm wholeheartedly in agreement with Mark Twain who once wrote, **"Find a job you enjoy doing and you will never have to work a day in your life."**

Living in Glen Brittle means that three quarters of my work is within walking distance, so no pesky commutes, no being stuck in traffic jams. My most popular client requests are traverses of the Cuillin Ridge and 'bagging' the Cuillin Munros. Throw in some photography guiding, some classic routes such as the Dubh Slabs/Ridge or Pinnacle Ridge and it makes for a nicely varied "workload".

If at all possible, I try to meet clients the day before for a chat, to issue any kit and make a plan. Typically, we'll meet up at the coffee shop on Glen Brittle campsite, check the forecast and arrange things over a mug of Cuillin coffee. In fact, the coffee shop is very much my office away from home. Clients and I will often meet there before an adventure and finish up there for celebratory drinks and cakes.



*The conditions we hope for. Looking over clouds to the main Cuillin Ridge from Blà Bheinn after a traverse of Clach Glas.*

Recent "summers" have been grim with seemingly month after month of rain, rivers in spate, high winds and unseasonably cold temperatures. Last year, April and May saw brilliant weather but thereafter the term summer was a total misnomer. Fortunately, the good weather coincided with some epic traverses, with inversions and stunning light shows courtesy of mother nature. The early season good times charged



up my mental batteries which was just as well given the lacklustre “summer” season. No drought conditions, no heat waves for us, just days dressed head to toe in Gore-Tex – “Full Metal Jacket” days, as I refer to them.



*Perfect conditions for a traverse. View north from Sgùrr Dearg*

Constantly working outdoors means it's a mixed bag, being out in all weathers. If you don't like bad weather then forget guiding as a career. In many ways, guiding is a lifestyle choice with very obvious pros and cons. Let's look at some highs and lows of the 2025 season. High up the list would be a one-day ridge traverse with a female American client. We started at early o'clock, a proper alpine start and enjoyed inversion conditions for much of the day. Scrambling and climbing high above the clouds, warm sunshine dappled our faces. Jagged peaks poked out of the glistening white clouds beneath us. Ascending through the clouds, all had been dark and dank, water everywhere, but above things were dry as a desert. Warm, dry rock, perfect conditions and we only saw a couple of people all day.

Such days make me pinch myself in disbelief. It was a long hard day and we were on the go for almost twenty hours but the rewards were commensurate with the effort. A delighted client, some fantastic memories, and a traverse completed in nigh on perfect conditions so

what's not to love? In my book, days at work don't get much better. Given the conditions, I'd happily have done a traverse for nothing.



*The In Pinn at sunrise with Blà Bheinn in the distance to the right*

Conversely, much of recent “summer” guiding seasons have been exercises in managing client expectations, of adopting ‘Plan B’, day after day, returning home soaked to the skin. This probably seems hard to believe but I still love going out in bad weather, and being paid to do so is the icing on the cake. One memorable day was a client wanting to go up Sgùrr Alasdair, the highest peak on Skye, in atrocious conditions. The forecast was for high winds and heavy rain.

I knew that we'd be sheltered from the prevailing wind if we ascended The Great Stone Chute and that the top ridge would be manageable even if we needed to rope things. Paths were like streams; in places the water was almost knee-deep. The burns were in spate and everywhere was a world of wetness as we splashed our way to Coire Lagan then up the Chute. The summit ridge was surprisingly quiet, the winds calmer than they had been lower down.

With the Munro bagged for the client, we raced down to the campsite coffee shop to warm up. It was one of those elemental experiences that will stick in my memory. We'd been out for under four hours but were on a real high as we sipped hot coffee and relived the adventure.

Having founded the Facebook group, All Things Cuillin, back in 2017, the members have proved loyal, the group ever friendly and helpful, a testament to the positive side of social media. I try to post daily and people love to follow not just my guiding activities but anything Cuillin-related. It has a real feel-good buzz about it which registers with the clients I guide. Many clients love just seeing things they have only heard about on Facebook, meeting the staff at the coffee shop, recounting tales I have written.



*At the office in winter*

Kit and gear are put through a tough torture test of daily use and probably get a lot more use and abuse than in most reviews.

Summer is a sociable season and a distinct contrast to winter when the glen becomes empty and guiding work is curtailed. Winter is given over to personal projects involving photography and writing. From April to November, I'll be out guiding five or six days a week. These will be long



hill days with one or two clients, meetings at coffee shops, cafes and pubs. By contrast, winter is a more solitary affair.

2020 saw Cicerone Press publish my guidebook to the Cuillin Ridge Traverse. I enjoyed writing it, but best of all is bumping into people on an almost daily basis who are using the book in its natural environment. The winter of 2024/25 was devoted to writing another book for Cicerone, a guide to the Cuillin Munros which will be coming out in 2026. In the long term, I plan to produce a large, "coffee table" type book about the Cuillin, a combination of epic photos and interesting tales. Much of the winter will be spent weather-watching, picking ideal days for photography. Typically, with a promising forecast, I will be up early and be on the ridge for sunrise but best of all are multi-day trips. Last winter, I walked around the coast then had a bivi on the summit of Sgùrr na Stri in deep snow. Night time photography under the stars with views down to Loch Coruisk and across to the Cuillin Ridge was pretty special.

High above Coir' a' Ghrunnda is a small cave by the bealach between Sgùrr Sgumain and Sgùrr Alasdair. In summer it can be a damp, drippy, and midge infested but in winter it can be transformed into a fairy-tale spectacle. Icicles hang from the roof, snow covers everything, the sun will rise over towards Sgùrr Dubh Mòr and photos can be taken from the luxury of your sleeping bag. It's a venue I often visit and Bridgette refers to it as "our spare room."



*Sgurr Sgumain bivi cave, “our spare room”*

Work and play are very much a fusion with little separation. Recently, a client and I were enduring torrential rain and high winds as we ascended Sgùrr a' Ghreadaidh. The client asked what would be my ideal day off. My reply was that I'd be high on a peak for sunrise. The next day was meant to be a rest day but the lure of a good forecast proved too much and I was up by the Inaccessible Pinnacle for dawn.

Relaxation and leisure will also be Cuillin-orientated. Bridgette and I might walk down to the beach for a walk, coffee on the campsite, possibly a kayak trip on Loch Brittle where we might see dolphins and seals, or white-tailed eagles soaring overhead.

Bridgette is an artist who works with locally gathered seaweed so a beach walk, whilst rest for me, is really work for her. It's rare for me to leave Skye and Bridgette jokes that I have to be dragged kicking and screaming across the bridge.

Life in the glen may not be perfect and certainly wouldn't be for everyone, but for us it feels like we are living our dream. It is a binary thing split between a super busy summer and a more relaxed rest of the year. Work,

rest and play are all closely linked into a seamless lifestyle very much in tune with nature and the seasons.



*Sgùrr Thearlaich, Sgùrr Alasdair and Sgùrr Sgumain seen from Sgùrr MhicChoinnich during an inversion*

Adrian's website can be found at [allthingscuillin.co.uk](http://allthingscuillin.co.uk). Adrian is also an ambassador for [keelaoutdoors.com](http://keelaoutdoors.com) and [builttosend.com](http://builttosend.com).

## Byron on Deeside

by Graham Watt

In 1803 Lord Byron climbed Lochnagar. He was 15 and visiting a school friend at Invercauld. Both were on holiday from Harrow School, although a tutor accompanied them.

In the Records of Invercauld, the gillie who guided him on his ascent of Lochnagar is quoted as saying follows,

*We set out from Invercauld early in the forenoon, crossed the Dee by the old bridge and then up the Garawalt. His Lordship rested often and looked at the scenery. He was very quiet and did not often speak to me. When we began to climb the crags of Loch-an-uan I thought he would not be able to scramble up, for he was rather lame, and I offered to assist him, but he would not have any help from me. When we got to the top he sat a long time on the edge of the rocks, looking about him, but seldom asked me any question; and we returned the same way as we went up.*



*Lord George Gordon Byron in his twenties*

From Invercauld Lord Byron went on a visit to Mar Lodge (the former building and not the current one which was re-built in 1895 after a fire), where he remained some days as the guest of the Earl of Fife. Accompanied by his tutor he went one day to see the Linn of Dee.

*"Impetuous in nature he rushed to the edge of the precipice and would have fallen into the abysmal depths beneath had not his tutor seized him by the arm and thus saved his life".*

His Harrow school friend Charles David Gordon was the eldest son of David Gordon, the fourteenth laird of Abergeldie. Byron wrote to him,

*Believe me, my dearest Charles, no letter from you can ever be unentertaining or dull, at least to me. On the contrary they will always be productive of the highest pleasure as often as you think proper to gratify me by your correspondence. I recollect some years ago passing near Abergeldie on an excursion through the Highlands ; it was at that time a most lovely place. I suppose you will soon have a view of the eternal snows that summit the top of Lachin-y-gair, which towers so magnificently above the rest of our Northern Alps. I still remember with pleasure the admiration which filled my mind when I first beheld it, and further on, the dark frowning mountains, which rise near Invercauld, together with the romantic rocks that over shadow Mar Lodge, a seat of Lord Fife's and the Cataract of the Dee, which dashes down the declivity with impetuous violence in the grounds adjoining the house.*

In 1807 while a student at Trinity College Cambridge (where as a Lord he did not have to sit exams), Byron recalled his climb of Lochnagar in a poem, the fifth verse of which is well known and all of which is often recorded as a song (with over 20 versions available on i-tunes).

### **DARK LOCHNAGAR**

*Away, ye gay landscapes, ye gardens of roses !  
In you let the minions of luxury rove,  
Restore me the rocks where the snow-flake reposes,  
Though still they are sacred to freedom and love.  
Yet Caledonia, beloved are thy mountains,  
Round their white summits though elements war,  
Though cataracts foam 'stead of smooth-flowing fountains,  
I sigh for the valley of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Ah ! there my young footsteps in infancy wander'd,  
My cap was the bonnet, my cloak was the plaid.  
On chieftains long perish'd my memory ponder'd  
As daily I strode through the pine-cover'd glade.*

*I sought not my home til the day's dying glory  
Gave place to the rays of the bright polar star,  
For fancy was cheer'd by traditional story  
Disclos'd by the natives of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Shaerds of the dead! Have I not heard your voices  
Rise on the night-rolling breath of the gale ?  
Surely the soul of the hero rejoices  
And rides on the wind o'er his own Highland vale.  
Round Loch na Garr while the stormy mist gathers,  
Winter presides in his cold icy car.  
Clouds there encircle the forms of my fathers;  
They dwell in the tempests of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Ill-starr'd, through brave, did no visions foreboding  
Tell you that fate had forsaken your cause ?  
Ah ! were you destined to die at Culloden,  
Victory crown'd not your fall with applause:  
Still you were happy in death's earthly slumber.  
You rest with your clan in the caves of Braemar;  
The pibroch resounds, to the piper's loud number,  
Your deeds on the echoes of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Years have rolled on, Lochnagar, since I left you,  
Years must elapse ere I tread you again;  
Nature of verdure and flowers has bereft you,  
Yet still are you dearer than Albion's plain.  
England ! They beauties are tame and domestic  
To one who has roved o'er the mountains afar:  
Oh for the crags that are wild and majestic !  
The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar !*

By 1803 Byron had already been a Lord for 5 years, but before that he had spent almost all of his first ten years in Aberdeen, the only son of his impoverished single mother, living in Queen Street and then Broad Street while attending the Aberdeen Grammar School.

To begin with Byron did not have fond memories of his time in Aberdeen. In the short time that his father was around, his parents argued furiously. His mother was emotionally unstable. He was sexually molested by a female family servant. The school favoured Latin and Calvinist doctrine, neither of which he liked.

Then and now, attending a mainstream school with a disability is tough (Byron had a congenital clubfoot), and often a prescription for social isolation, ridicule and even cruelty from peers. Byron found solace and company in reading. He read voraciously in his Aberdeen years, laying foundations for his later writing.

When the headmaster of Aberdeen Grammar School invited the young George Gordon into his study for cake and wine, it was clear that something momentous had happened. After a sequence of family deaths, young George was catapulted into English society as a Lord. Even by today's low standards of ennoblement that was social mobility on a gigantic, exhilarating scale.

His views about Scotland softened with age and distance. In his own words he was "*born half a Scot but bred a whole one*". Throughout his life he spoke with a "slight Scottish accent", betraying his Aberdonian origins.

When a boy, Byron lived for a time at Balletrich, a few miles east of Ballater on Deeside, where he was sent to recover from an illness. "Dark Lochnagar" was not the only effort of his muse upon Deeside. Another ode begins

*When I roved, a young Highlander, o'er the dark heath,  
And climbed thy steep summit, oh, Morven of snow !*

Also, in his poem, "The Adieu,"

*Adieu, ye mountains of the clime  
Where grew my youthful years :  
Where Loch-na-garr is snows sublime  
His giant summits rear.  
Why did my childhood wander forth  
From you, ye regions of the North,  
With sons of pride to roam ?  
Why did I quit my Highland cave,  
Marr's dusty heath, and Dee's clear wave,.  
To seek a Southern home ?*

And again in "Don Juan"

*As Auld Lang Syne brings Scotland one and all,  
Scotch plaids, Scotch snoods, the blue hills and clear streams,*

*The Dee, the Don, Balgounie's brig's black wall,  
Of what I then dreamt, clothed in their own pall,  
Like Banquo's offspring – floating past me seems  
My childhood in this childishness of mine :  
I care not – if a glimpse of "Auld Lang Syne".*

The poet dated his love of mountainous countries to the time he first visited Deeside, and remembered Lochnagar while overlooking the plains of Troy years later. As he wrote to Sir Walter Scott from Italy in 1822, 'My *"heart warms to the Tartan or to anything of Scotland which reminds me of Aberdeen and other parts not so far from the Highlands as that town."*

Byron liked swimming, an exercise in which he was not disabled, and swam not only at the Brig of Balgownie, but later, and famously, down the Grand Canal in Venice and across the Hellespont between Europe and Asia. But his climbing of Lochnagar must have taken much longer than the one hour and 40 minutes he took to swim the Hellespont and was, perhaps, his most prodigious feat of physical exercise.

### **A Cairngorm Club Connection**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1923, a statue of Lord Byron was unveiled outside the Aberdeen Grammar School.

Designed by the King's Sculptor, James Pittendrigh-Macgillivray, the bronze statue stands on a pedestal of granite from the Inver quarry, halfway between Crathie and Braemar.

On behalf of the school a wreath was laid by pupil George Theodore Robertson Watt. He was ten years old, the eldest son of Theodore Watt, and nephew of Edward Watt, who was to become Editor of the Cairngorm Club Journal and later Lord Provost of Aberdeen.





*George Watt in a 1923 class photo, standing in the centre of the back row*

A year later on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1924, George Watt climbed Lochnagar with 4 family members and over a hundred others for the unveiling of the Cairngorm Club indicator. As a medical student at Aberdeen University he was a member of the Cairngorm Club and attended its annual dinners.

George graduated in 1936 and moved to work as an assistant in general practice at Inch in Aberdeenshire. After a house job at the Aberdeen Maternity Hospital under Professor Sir Dugald Baird, he moved to hospital jobs in London and Sheffield to pursue a career in obstetrics and gynaecology.

When war broke out, George joined the navy and was posted as a Surgeon-Lieutenant serving on HMS Wryneck, a destroyer operating out of Alexandria in Egypt, with many voyages transferring troops across the Eastern Mediterranean.

On 27<sup>th</sup> April 1941, HMS Wryneck was attacked and sunk by German bombers, while evacuating British troops from mainland Greece. Survivors on rafts were strafed by machine guns. An eye-witness told George's parents that he had died instantly in the ship's medical station. His resting

place is a war grave in the Aegean Sea, midway between Greece and Crete. He was 28.

George was one of 194 Aberdeen Grammar School former pupils who died in active service in World War 2. Their average age was 27. Ninety-two were aged under 25. Most were single men. There were nine sets of brothers. In the School's Roll of Honour, they are not just names or statistics but individuals with photographs and pen portraits of lives cut short.

50 members of the Cairngorm Club served in the British Armed Forces during World War 2. George was one of six who died.

On 14<sup>th</sup> September 2023, George Watt's great niece Nuala Watt, one of Scotland's leading young poets, laid a wreath and photograph at the foot of the Byron statue.



*Nuala Watt and Graham Watt, great niece and nephew of George Watt, at the foot of the Byron Statue, September 2023*

Both Byron and George Watt died fighting for freedom in Greece. The statue is a reminder, therefore, not only of Byron's fame as a poet but also

the sacrifice made by him and by others. The inscription with the wreath read,

*"In memory of those who gave their lives fighting the cause of freedom  
in countries other than their own".*

Following the laying of the wreath, Nuala Watt (like Byron, "a disabled poet obsessed with books in her school years") read a short poem:

**So, we'll go no more a roving**

So, we'll go no more a roving  
So late into the night,  
Though the heart be still as loving,  
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,  
And the soul wears out the breast,  
And the heart must pause to breathe,  
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,  
And the day returns too soon,  
Yet we'll go no more a roving  
By the light of the moon.

(Lord George Gordon Byron 1788-1824)

## Subnivean Sublime: the beauty of snow tunnels

by Mike Duguid

In winter, from within the storm's fury, frozen sculpture crawls around cold black rock, forming swirls and edges, sputtered and crackling textures. Snow and wind dance a vigorous tango of deposition and erosion. The battle between air and land, usually invisible, now becomes solid form in cornices, waves and windslab etched into geometric ripples of sastrugi.

If we're intrepid in our exploration and lucky with weather we can catch these at their best: aglow with a dawn palette of pinks, blues, amber, wrapped in tendrils of sparkling spindrift like ice ghosts sculpting their magic around us.



*Sunrise at Coire Boidheach*

The high Cairngorms are rarely that kind though, and it's more usual to be staggering through a storm, bleary goggled and grimly focused on the compass in a frost-encrusted mitt, barely glimpsing what nature forges around us. In a few months, winter has retreated and these sculptures have splashed down gullies into The Dee, their glittering magic forgotten

as summer hazes the plateau in muted pastels. Only tiny islands of snow survive amongst the sizzling uplands: bright speckles and notches winking amongst a landscape of grey and brown rock and heather.

Winter's still got a last gasp for the dedicated chionophile, a final sculpted surprise in blue for the off-trail adventurer. Hidden underneath a rare few of those quickly melting patches, where the contours agree, the wind blew true and the snow packed deep, and if the thaw and rain of spring was not a torrent, then for a month or so we can perhaps peek inside the incredible beauty of a snow tunnel.



My first inkling of their existence was on a blaring hot June ascent of Beinn a Bhuid. I was drawn across the baked ground to a tiny bright remnant of the "Laird's tablecloth" snow patch, and peaking into a small gap was surprised and intrigued by the cool air and the unusual colours painted by snow algae, and resolved to explore more of these in future - I wondered if larger examples existed. It wouldn't be until a few years later, after much winter exploration looking for places of deep snow accumulation for the purpose of snowholing, that I'd arrange a specific targeted exploration of them.

It was worth the wait though - on a scorching day, hot and bothered from scrabbling up each high contour, to enter one is a delight on the senses: shaded from the glare and soothed by chill, a gallery of exquisite shape and colour alien to the parched surroundings. It's been patiently hewn outwards: first by a thawed stream gurgling to life in spring, then sculpted cavernous by rivulets of meltwater spinning sinuous magic down from the ceiling. A cascade of curvature, all eerily glowing with submarine hues.



A late June might be the best time; before then these spaces are dark and narrow labyrinths, unseen deep below the snow with no easy entrance. One might enter not with abracadabra but deft enlargement of a small entry point with the shovel or axe. It takes time for them to grow wide and bright into something one would be confidently drawn into, so summer must be well afoot but not fully inclined. A fortnight later and the sun has burned through the roof, their collapse more rapid once the warm air can easily circulate within. The final jumble of bergs succumb quickly to the sun and dissolve into the stream.

How does one see such a fleeting phenomenon in the vast spaces and distant nooks of The Cairngorms? First one must understand why only a few spots accumulate deep snow. Our prevailing westerly winds blow across the heights, gathering spindrift, and a hollow or gully that provides refuge for spindrift to drop out of the wind and also shields from direct sun is a good candidate, usually steep-sided gullies splitting the high plateau. With a target location we also need a date, and fortunately when to prospect to these distant places is greatly aided from space. Every day, the Copernicus satellites capture photos from 785km above, and when clear of clouds, we can see snow patch cover shrinking into summer with the last few remnants often indicating a place of high snow depth. An online archive allows looking up dates and places of the best snow tunnels from previous years and comparing what cover remained then and now.

Using these methods over a few years has led to the discovery of some fairly reliable locations, albeit way off the usual trade routes:

**Lochnagar** - Coire an Daimh Mhoile's narrow confines are the best here, while Coire Boidheach holds snow deeper and later it's not sufficiently v-shaped in profile for something large (though I first spotted "tunnel breathing" here where the inside fogs and clears on a periodic cycle). The upper Glas Allt and Allt a Choire Dhuibh might only form something in a very good year of snow.



*Waterfall chamber at Coire an Daimh Mhoile*

**Ben Avon** - Flowing south, the Allt an Eas Mhoir and its eastern forks, the northern upper part of Allt an Eas Bhig, and the steep snow patch at 1309 SE of Carn Eas. Flowing east, Allt an Sgoir Ribhaich (difficult geometry at the confluence above the falls), Allt Phouple and Allt an t-Saighdeir.

**Ben Macdui** - a well known one exits the slabs of the Feith Bhuidhe near Hell's Lum. Garbh Uisge Beag is less visible but equally reliable.

**Beinn a Bhuird** - The Allt an t-Sneachda is the right shape but not quite high enough so has only small fare, but the Allt Dearg western fork gully below Cnap a Chleirich has a bowl at 1050m that is the biggest of them all, the huge table-top plateau to the west catching a large harvest of spindrift - it often provides a tunnel over 100m long, and is easily seen from distance when emerging from The Slugain. Elsewhere, south-west of The Sneck is sometimes 'in'. To the north, The Allt Stob an t-Sluichd from 1000m to 850m has some good waterfall snow caves.

Outside any considerations of snow tunnels, many of these are worthwhile alternative routes of exploration, particularly later in summer when the combination of rock, waterfalls and pools can make for an attractive hike/swim/scramble ascent isolated from the summer crowds.

One has to consider safety before heading for and entering a tunnel. Exploring a disappearing structure has obvious hazards, but the first consideration is recent and current weather. A dry period means any stream is a trickle whereas recent rain means the snow pack is heavier and less stable. Excessive heat quickens melting, but strong sunshine illuminates the inside.

On arrival an inspection all around is required: the top surface, edges, and inner structure - looking for any cracks, imbalances in support (i.e. not arch-shaped), and any recent signs of any collapse. A route in and out is considered - upstream/ downstream, what other gaps could be exits (sometimes a randkluft provides this),



and any deep or impassable waterfalls or pools. The nature of the terrain will involve some clambering on wet rock and vegetation around the edges, and I've found it usually better to commit to wading in-stream rather than limbo dancing on moss around the edges in a constricted space. It's like gill scrambling but with very cold water and under an ice roof; neoprene socks and fast draining trail runners work well. Once inside the clock is ticking against the cold and wet and exit will need to be made before extremities become numb.



I recall such an exit from underneath the Allt Stob an t-Sluichd, a remote place where I'd be very surprised to meet anybody. I'd spent 20 minutes below the snow attempting to photograph the best angle of a waterfall pool, and rather than contorting back up past wet rocks to the entry, I decided to excavate a small randkluft at the side. Levering

myself out, dripping wet and swatting the excavated pile of snow aside like some demented yeti-snow-mole, I turned to a surprised intake of breath - a lady hiking nearby stared at me open-mouthed. There was no response to my quick "hiya", she hurried onwards, double-taking glances backward at the apparition. I do wonder if and how she recounts my sudden appearance when telling tales of her mountain adventures.

Those inclined to explore these should look to do so sooner rather than later. It's a tiny window of opportunity each year and sometimes the snow will not have laid deep enough, or heavy spring rain will have accelerated the thaw prematurely. With a typical height of above 1000m needed and only certain aspects and topography suitable they'd always be a rarity, but nowadays their brief display becomes shorter, their beauty more scarce.

Snow tunnels are sufficiently ephemeral and unexplored that they get barely a passing mention in over 100 years of our journals - usually a few words of a curious glance from the outside that didn't reveal the wonder within. Unseen by most, a curiosity of the natural world that will probably be lost from The Cairngorms in the lifetimes of our younger members. At the time of writing, the Laird's tablecloth, a snow patch described in Victorian times as everlasting and where my intrigue of the last few years

started, has melted away earlier than ever before. This article may well be both a literary hello and goodbye to this phenomenon in our mountains.



*More snow tunnel photos here: <https://bit.ly/snowtunnelphotos>*

## In Memoriam

The Club has been saddened by the passing of several members over the last 2 years.

### **Robbie Middleton**

by Richard Shirreffs

Robbie's maritime-centred career, starting as a merchant seaman but rising to become a Master Mariner and Captain of large trans-ocean cargo ships, may seem an unlikely background for one who rose to become Hon. President of The Cairngorm Club, but such was Robbie's versatility that he achieved that. Born and brought up in Aberdeen, he went on to navigation school. He met his wife-to-be Judy as the flatmate of a friend of one of his fellow navigation school pupils. They married in 1972, while Robbie was still spending most of his time at sea. Judy was already an active member of the Club, and Robbie joined in 1974. Even after giving up touring the world as a ship's captain, Robbie kept up his maritime links, including a leading role in oil-pollution clean-ups, serving on the Peterhead Harbour Board, and becoming President and later Hon. Treasurer of the Nautical Institute.

Robbie and Judy part-owned with friends a caravan at the Braemar Golf Course, and became very much adopted into the Braemar community, especially after Robbie retired from his work at sea. Robbie came to serve on the East Area Board of Scottish Natural Heritage (appointed for his maritime background and his knowledge of the hills and environmental matters) and was a founder member of both the Upper Deeside Access Trust and the East Grampian Coastal Partnership. He was a keen singer, with the Stonehaven Choral Society. As a lay preacher well known in and around Braemar, he was sometimes asked to deputise in church services at Braemar and Crathie, including taking the service for Prince Charles and Camilla the day after their marriage. He was a tireless Rotarian charity stalwart, with efforts ranging from Scotland to Uganda.



It was in 1986 that Robbie first joined the Club committee, and then in 1993 he began a marathon 12-year stint as Huts Custodian. In 2003 through to 2005 he played a key role in the project to upgrade Muir, to make it disabled-friendly, with a disabled toilet, wider doors, an enlarged kitchen and a new water supply; for this he was elected an Honorary Member, and later Honorary President. Robbie loved the hills but was limited in what he could do by back problems. After a period of more serious illness, in which he never lost the sparkle that was a feature of his conversations, he died in September 2025, survived by his wife Judy, two daughters and two grand-daughters.

### **Steven Pollock**

by Kevin Adam

Steven had a fall while climbing with a friend at Steall Gorge Crags in April 2025. Emergency help was quickly on the scene, mountain rescue with their doctor, but he could not be saved. Steven was 37 years old.

Steven lived a great life in Fort William with his devoted wife Sarah and his lovely children Millie, ten, and Hamish, five years old.

Born in Wick in 1987 where the family had lived for generations, he moved to the Aberdeen area when his father took an oil industry job, attending Portlethen Academy. Although diagnosed with dyslexia, Steven went on to do well at school, then studied Electrical Engineering at Robert Gordon University, eventually reaching Chartered Engineer level and gaining rewarding work first in the oil industry, then the Fort William smelter, and more recently designing wind farms for the renewables sector.



While in Aberdeen, Steven joined the Cairngorm Club around 2018, having dabbled a little in climbing and hillwalking before. Joining the club introduced him to a wealth of people also very keen on climbing, and Steven was a regular at the weekly outings to the sea cliffs, Pass of Ballater, and the nearby mountains of the Dubh Loch, Lochnagar and the Cairngorms, rapidly gaining skills and moving up through the grades. Although very busy with work and family, Steven was very

focused, and Sarah was always happy to give him the time for his

passion. Steven took every opportunity to climb. He was dedicated to being in the best climbing condition, was very fit, and rose early every morning to visit the gym before work.

Steven and I were great friends and we had many great climbing outings, initially in the Aberdeen area, then further afield in Scotland and the islands, and also overseas.

Steven joined the Scottish Mountaineering Club for the opportunity to climb with experienced people and join in with the events on offer. He took part in the SMC organised 2025 International Mountain meeting at the CIC Hut in March 2025 and was delighted to climb with some top internationals. Winter climbing was his favourite pastime, and he was progressing through the Scottish climbs.

Steven was so much more than just a climber though. He was a great father and husband. He was very bright and was passionate about many things. Funny, loyal, capable, enthusiastic, dependable, driven, simply a great guy. He left us far too soon.

### **John (Jack) Connell**

by his family

Jack and Peggy Connell, who were active members of the Cairngorm Club for over 30 years, both died peacefully during 2025 and both at the age of 98.

Mike Duguid tells us that, as they became less able to tackle the more challenging outings, they were instrumental in setting up the 'Mid week walks' that are still popular today and are sometimes referred to as "Connells". They both participated in the Centenary celebrations of the Club in 1987.



Jack undertook a solo walk across Scotland, from Mallaig to Montrose, in 1996 (with support from Peggy), an account of which was published in the Journal in 1999.

## **John Hay**

by Richard Shirreffs

John Yeaman Leslie Hay, the son of two Club members Leslie Hay and Mrs Mina Hay, was born in Aberdeen in 1938 and died on 18 August 2025. He must have found a love of the hills in his teens, joined the Club in 1954 aged 16, and joined the committee in 1958. The Club History records "In the mid 1950s John Hay emerged as a climber of no little repute. He climbed extensively and led half a dozen Severe to Hard Severe new routes on Creagan a'Choire Etchachan, both in summer and in winter. Severe climbs on Coire Sputan Dearg, Coire Brochain and Sgoran Dubh also added to his achievements." The 1957 issue of the Club Journal names John as leading seven first ascents, including one with Tom Patey. When 18, he joined the SMC as its youngest member, and is mentioned in their 1958 Journal as achieving the first winter ascent of Ebony Gully in December 1957. All of this when he was not yet 20.

John trained as a lawyer and joined his father's firm Cooper & Hay. He became Club Secretary in 1962, serving for 5 years until Eric Johnston took over. He was less actively involved in the Club in his latter years, but he continued to love the outdoors and over the years managed to acquire a number of small cottages in remote locations. He remained a member of the SMC and was latterly regarded as their "Father of the Club" and "Master of the Malts". He is survived by his wife Elizabeth, also a Club member, and by three children, three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The Club has also received notification of the passing of the following former members:

- Fred Belcher
- George Howie
- Joyce Hancock
- John Inglis
- Robin Kay
- Douglas Orr
- Helen Ross

We will miss each one and wish to share our condolences with their families.

## **Committee Update**

by Helen Russell, President

Over the last two years the committee has been busy with general club improvements, primarily in response to the club survey that was carried out in 2023. These changes are intended to keep the club in good health for the future.

We have successfully launched our new website and it has been well received by our members. We are expecting that its new more modern look will also attract new members. In addition, we held a new event to help market the club and this resulted in several new members joining the club. This event will now be a regular in our annual calendar. Our now regular Facebook and Instagram posts have also helped increase awareness on social media.

The new merchandise (hoodies, t-shirts, beanies, and buffs) with the Caimgorm Crest has been very popular with our members and is now permanently available to order.

Muir Cottage remains a favourite with members and guests and we have introduced a regular members' weekend in November in addition to our annual and very popular Burns Supper weekend. Improvements at Muir continue to be the focus of our attention and the heating system has been completely revamped to enable easier control and remote monitoring. In addition, a new dehumidifier has been installed in the drying room to make drying wet gear more efficient.

We have successfully produced new Indicators for Lochnagar and Ben Macdui; and these will be installed in 2026. We are very grateful to the people who have kindly funded the production cost.

We are in the process of becoming Incorporated. This change will provide the club with a formal legal identity and introduce limited liability, meaning members will be protected from personal financial responsibility. To enable this, the club held a vote in February and approved a motion to formally become a SCIO (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation). Members will not see any changes in any of our activities, processes or procedures except that committee members and members will get the benefit of being better protected from liability.

In response to new Mountaineering Scotland Risk Assessment Guidelines the committee is busy revamping the Club's risk assessments. In a world where we are becoming more litigious it is important to ensure that our processes are robust and stand up to external scrutiny.

Our key activities: Weekend Day Meet, Midweek Week Walk, Weekend Meets and regular Climbing Events all remain as popular as ever. There is one new addition that has proved very popular: the Stravaigs, replacing previous Daunders, which provides a gentler option for some of our members.

The Cairngorm Club

## **Proceedings of the Club**

by Ken Thomson

This review covers two years of Club activities, i.e. since early 2024.

### **General Meetings**

Both the 2024 and 2025 AGMs were held at the Queens Cross Church Centre. In 2024, 37 members attended, and the following were elected or re-elected\* as Office-Bearers: Judy Middleton (Hon. President), Helen Russell\* (President), Mike Duguid\* and Brian Purves (Vice-Presidents), Donald Thomas\* (Treasurer), Craig Thomson (Day Meets), Helen Russell\* (Weekend Meets Secretary), Eilidh Scobbie (Hut Custodian), Stuart Dick\* (Climbing Activities), Tom Litterick (Social Activities Secretary), Colin Brown\* (Communications Secretary); and the following as “ordinary” Committee members: Vay Mutch\*, Esperanza Martin Gil\*, Will Ellwood\*, Grant Signorini, Kevin Adam, Anne Pinches and Carolyn Ainsbury. The Club Secretaryship was left vacant. During the year, Club membership rose slightly, from 359 to 373.

The 2025 AGM saw 23 members attending, and the following changes in office-bearers and Committee membership: Susan Jensen (Secretary as from 1 March 2026), Mike Duguid (Communications Secretary) and Chris Wilson (Climbing Secretary), and John Fenemore, Ian Sneddon and Caroline Watt (“ordinary” Committee members). It was reported that Club membership had again risen, to 380.

### **Day Meets**

In both years, the traditional excursions were made to Lochnagar in January and across the Cairngorms in September, as well as some midsummer overnights. New ventures included the Convals near Dufftown and the ‘four coloured hills’ of the Corrennie Moor near Alford, while a centennial indicator visit to Lochnagar in July 2024 involved one or two speeches at the summit. A similar visit to the Ben Macdui indicator in August 2025 had to be aborted due to high winds. In addition, some snowholing and multi-day camping trips were made each year.

|           | 2024                           | 2025                             |
|-----------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| January   | Lochnagar                      | Lochnagar                        |
| February  | Ladder Hills                   | Glas Maol - Carn an Tuirc        |
| March     | Carn an t-Sagairt Mor          | Sgor Gaoith                      |
| April     | Glen Feshie                    | Glen Esk - Glen Clova            |
| May       | Devil's Point                  | Beinn a' Bhuid                   |
| June      | Mamores (overnight)            | Beinn a' Ghlo                    |
| July      | Lochnagar Indicator Centennial | Tarf Hotel (overnight)           |
| August    | Creag Meagaidh (overnight)     | Ben Macdui                       |
| September | Cairngorm Traverse N to S      | Cairngorm Traverse (Lairig Ghru) |
| October   | The Convals, Dufftown          | Ben Chonzie                      |
| November  | Ben Vrackie                    | Mount Battock                    |
| December  | Morven                         | Corrennie Moor                   |

## Weekend Meets

These meets proved very popular in both years, when many of the usual centres were revisited:

|           | 2024                            | 2025                         |
|-----------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| January   | Muir (Burns Night)              | Muir (Burns Night)           |
| February  | Lagangarbh, Glencoe             | Lagangarbh, Glencoe          |
| March     | Milehouse Cottage, Glenfeshie   | Raeburn Hut, Laggan          |
| April     | Mol Mor, Torridon               | Kintail, Morvich             |
| May       | Loch Ossian YH                  | Glenbrittle Hut, Skye        |
| June      | Strawberry Cottage, Glen Affric | Belfast Climber Hut, Mourmes |
| July      | Orkney, camping                 | Jura, camping                |
| August    | Glassie Farm, Aberfeldy         | Knoydart Bunkhouse, Inverie  |
| September | Saddle Hostel, Invergarry       | Galloway Centre, Loch Ken    |
| October   | Raeburn Hut, Laggan             | Mol Mor, Torridon            |
| November  | Inver, Achnasheen               | Muir Cottage                 |
| December  | Corran                          | Corran                       |

## Climbing

In both years, climbing meets, both formal and informal, took place at least once a week, utilising the indoor climbing walls during the winter months. From spring to autumn, outdoor meets were held when conditions allowed at the sea cliffs, the inland crags, or in the Cairngorms.

## Mid-week walks

Coordinated by Joyce Ritchie, these walks revisited several well-known locations.

|           | 2024                       | 2025                            |
|-----------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| January   | Beltie Hill, Torphins      | Kincardine O'Neil - Lumphanan   |
| February  | Loch Kinord                | Hill of Foudland                |
| March     | Bervie - Benholm Coastal   | Cults - Countesswells Hazlehead |
| April     | Stirling Hill, Peterhead   | Mormond Hill                    |
| May       | -                          | Carn Mor, Inverey               |
| June      | Kerloch                    | Clachnaben                      |
| July      | Carn Ealasaid, Cockbridge  | Glen Gelder                     |
| August    | Lochnagar Contour          | Ben Tìrran, Glen Clov           |
| September | Glenbuchat Ridge           | Bennachie                       |
| October   | Cairn William, Pitfichie   | Goauch - Scolty                 |
| November  | Arbroath - Gourdon Coastal | Dunecht - Barmekin              |
| December  | Ellon Circular             | Sgor na h-Iolaire, Glen Gironck |

## Stravaigs

Introduced in March 2024 by Gill Shirreffs, Judy Middleton, Eilidh Scobbie and Jay Turner, this new and well attended form of Club activity offered shorter and flatter walks on Fridays intermediate to the monthly Thursday Mid-Week Walks.

|           | 2024                     | 2025                   |
|-----------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| January   | -                        | Kingswells - Bucksburn |
| February  | -                        | Girdleness             |
| March     | Drum Castle              | Inverurie - Keith Hall |
| April     | Bellwood, Aboyne         | Huntly                 |
| May       | -                        | Aboyne/Finzean         |
| June      | Monymusk                 | Leschangie Woods       |
| July      | Lumphanan - Tullochvenus | 7 Bridges Ballater     |
| August    | Crathes                  | Huntly North-East      |
| September | Monymusk                 | Aden Country Park      |
| October   | Tarland                  | Insch - Dunnideer      |
| November  | Torphins                 | Glen Tanar             |
| December  | Ellon                    | Potarch                |

## Social Activities

These followed the usual pattern of monthly illustrated talks at Queens Cross Church during the winter, annual Dinners in November at the Royal Northern & University Club, and a summer BBQ at the RNUC, with an extra BBQ at Muir in August 2024. Most were organized by Eilidh Scobbie

in 2024, and by Tom Litterick in 2025. The talk at the 2024 Dinner was given by Kirsty Pallas, on social inclusion in mountaineering, and that at the 2025 Dinner by Anna Wells, on her Winter Round of the Munros.

## **Communications**

Until autumn 2025, Colin Brown continued to maintain the Club's website [www.cairngormclub.org.uk](http://www.cairngormclub.org.uk), and to edit the thrice-yearly Newsletters, which became electronic-only in June 2024, as did membership cards that year. The Google Group email system was well-used, supplemented by WhatsApp. By the end of 2025, the Forum had 195 members, about 1550 topics and nearly 8000 posts, but was being overtaken for meet reports by the Club Facebook account, with over 1000 followers. In November 2025, a new website, designed mostly by incoming Comms Secretary Mike Duguid, was introduced, to general acclaim.

## **Muir Cottage**

In May 2024, Eilidh Scobbie took over as Custodian from Kees Witte, and Kevin Adam replaced her in early December 2025, Forbes Macpherson continuing as Muir Booking Secretary throughout. Bed-nights totalled 2244 and 2252 for the calendar years 2024 and 2025 respectively, and useful Work Weekends were held in both years. A WhatsApp group was set up to coordinate any help needed to "manage" Muir, and monthly safety checks were undertaken. In 2025, Kevin Adam coordinated safety-related electrical improvements, and remote heating controls. A Sub-Committee was set up to consider longer-term improvements, e.g. to toilet and plumbing arrangements.

## **Finance**

Membership subscription revenue rose to £9,304 in 2023/24 and £9,739 in 2024/25, and Muir bednight receipts to £22,234 and £22,919 respectively. After incoming donations, legacies, etc., these resulted in total receipts of £52,104 and £50,313. On the expenditure side, higher affiliation fees became payable to Mountaineering Scotland, Muir costs were similar to the above receipts, and a £5,000 donation was made to a MS/OATS "It's Up To Us" footpath appeal. After meet subsidies, and the usual range of Club donations (including £1,000 donations for Mountain Training Scotland Bursaries in both years), subscriptions and training

grants, very similar small deficits of just over £1,500 were recorded for each year, while the Club's bank balance remained high, at £103,723 on 30 September 2024 and at £102,176 a year later.

## **Other**

Over the two years under review, Garry Wardrope organized two training courses on winter skills, three on night navigation, and one on first aid. The Club provided financial support to several members taking mountain leadership courses.

The President organised a successful Club merchandise campaign, based on purchases of hoodies, T-shirts, beanies and snoods from Funky Panther Ltd. at Cove Bay.

With assistance from several quarters, Ken Thomson arranged the design and ordering of replacement mountain indicators for the summits of Lochnagar and Ben Macdui. At time of writing, the Lochnagar one awaits installation in Spring 2026, and the Macdui one should undergo the same fate in summer that year.

Jean Robinson produced issue no. 115 of the *Cairngorm Club Journal* in Spring 2024. Later that year, Mark Norris took over the editorship, and material for Journal no. 116 was accumulated by early 2026.

## Acknowledgments

As ever, this Journal could not have been written without articles from far and wide, and many thanks go to all of our contributors.

I hope as readers you will be inspired to become future article writers!

Notwithstanding the wealth of material we have been able to work with, it is no mean task to compile the Journal into a readable format, and many thanks therefore also go to our proofreaders (Sue Chalmers, Ian Hamilton, Vay Mutch, and Ken Thomson).

Mark Norris, March 2026

Email: [journal@cairngormclub.org.uk](mailto:journal@cairngormclub.org.uk)