

SECTION 10:

“That Long Walk”: Backpacking And Wilderness



Outside of the army, backpacking tends to be a solo or small group affair, as we’ll see in this sample of journeys by members and friends from across our period. It’s easier with a small party, and essential if you’re using wild sites that are often confined, and where you have to be sensitive to the environment. Does that mean you’ll miss out on the comedy club GMC atmosphere? No! On two of my own trips the locals provided the humour, both incisive and black...

Incisive first. In 2002 I walked across Wales from Pontardulais to Conwy. Very near the start, as recorded in “The Gwydyr 19” magazine:

“I’d met the group of small boys practising their rugby whilst lost in a new estate that wasn’t on my 20 year old map...The rugby stopped, and all eyes were on me. ‘Ooh that’s a big bag’ in South Wales treble ‘are you walking round the world?’ The smallest gazed up, in awe, but unfazed – he knew just what was going on and piped ‘Are you on the television?’ Eventually I persuaded them that a camera crew, sound team and instant stardom were not going to follow me round the corner...

Practical questions now came thick and fast: the weight of the rucsac in both imperial and metric; the relative quality of the beer in [North Wales] versus ours down here; the name, function and cost of the karrimat. And a killer from a young Paxman ‘And you have a wife who goes backpacking with you...?’ I was set on my right road... with a dire warning of expenditure ahead...’Ooh you’ll have to stay in hotels!’ And so I did, but not yet.”

In the early part of the century the Queens of Backpacking were Gill Beamer and Janet Ford, based up in Torridon. They did some very fine routes together: in 2000 the classic Blair Atholl to Aviemore by the rivers Tilt and Geldie, and the Lairig Ghru; and in 2001 Crianlarich to Fort William by the West Highland Way. And another classic in 2003, Dundonell to Poolewe across the mountainous and uninhabited Fisherfield Forest, with its deep, unbridged rivers.

They were joined in 2004 by Heather Bliss and Lin Jensen. This time the route was in very remote country, a huge loop around Ben Vuirich south of Beinn a Ghlo, from Straloch to Killiecrankie. In “The Gwydyr 21” magazine Gill writes of the contrasting moods of backpacking:

“Gleann Fearnach is more of a broad strath bounded by hills of [over 2000’] ...The track followed the river and we were treated to some good sunshine, interspersed with showers, which produced the usual quandary of whether to struggle out of the rucksacks to don waterproofs. At two-ish hunger came upon us, and we settled down at an idyllically sunny spot beside the river, to the Archers theme tune, raucously sung, to appease the regular addicts!...An attack of euphoria, soon to be dashed...

As we came... to Daldhu, CRASH, SPLASH an absolute downpour, accompanied by thunder, lightning and a mini-whirlwind came out of nowhere! We stood timorously...dripping and debating, [when] to our great relief

the storm rolled through and disappeared as quickly as it had come, replaced by washed-out blue skies.

The sun grew stronger as we topped the rise and before us was a bowl in the hills guarded by the bulk of Beinn a Ghlo. In the midst of heathery ground we could see green turf surrounding a ruined shieling, our proposed camp site.

We set up the tents, and took our aperitifs sitting on karrimats, enjoying the constantly changing pattern of sunlight and shadow on the hillsides around us. Janet, Heather and I were on the traditional ‘uisge beatha’, while Lin had devised a ready mix G&T and a little red wine. Sophisticated tastes creeping in, or what? Janet and I introduced Lin and Heather to our delicious dal and rice, then eventually as dusk settled we were driven into the tents by a mild onset of midges. During the night, a hungry rodent had a go at the lentils, so this became known as Mouse Camp.”

Single sex traditions were maintained by our next featured backpack, the June 2006 journey of the “dangerous brothers” i.e. Geoff Brierley, Mike Dagley, Tara O’Reilly, and Chris Russell, from Barmouth to Beddgelert on a very bold and tough line indeed. They got trains to Barmouth from the Hut to start off. In “The Gwydyr” 23 magazine we again experience the pleasures and the pain thanks to Geoff Brierley...



“Shorts Of The Empire – no.23”
Brierley, O’Reilly, Russell and Dagley

“The idea of a journey started...from an idea Chris Russell had...A journey to encompass many peaks, valleys and vistas. A journey to test but also give a rich reward. Naturally, I was completely against it..

Earlier this year the issue arose again and I had become so used to hearing about it I agreed that I thought it would be something I’d like to do...So that was it...decided to start training...I had simply no idea. Even though I had carried a fifty litre bag, full, for nearly a full year ready for the [Welsh] 3000s, with about three weeks left...Chris and I filled our larger rucksacks...with most but not all of the things we would take with us. My bag was 85 litres, and was pretty much filled completely.”

Their first campsite was on the magical SW Rhinog pass of Bwlch y Rhiwgyr, poised between north and south. They

encountered a problem I’ve had a good few times...

“We got to camp at 20.18 and immediately set about getting the tents pitched and the food cooked. This was made slightly more interesting by the fact that we were severely limited on the water front...the stream on the map being dry at its top. Just over an hour later, when sunset was approaching we looked over to the Llyn Peninsular and the view we saw was simply superb...”

After a windy and rainy night the next day was dry but misty till the afternoon. The party went over – wait for it – Diffwys, Y Llethr, Rhinog Fach and Rhinog Fawr to camp at Llyn Ddu. Mike’s article on the trip records that they bathed mercifully unnamed “body parts” while Geoff writes more poetically:

“A late camp here gave us time to eat and enjoy the atmosphere of the amphitheatre that Rhinog Fawr created, gently shrouded with a wisp of cloud.”

Let’s hope *that* wisp also tastefully concealed *those* body parts from the wider world!

The end of day three (to a camp above Llyn Llenyrch north of Maentwrog) started to be stressful for Geoff because of blisters, which are brutal with a backpack bearing down on them. Geoff felt “every step was pain” while Mike, feet OK, could enthuse about the view of Snowdon and the Moelwyns, even through his anti midge headnet “it was idyllic...beautiful.” Geoff writes:

“Had it not been for Mr Dagley keeping us...positive... seemingly unfazed and having a conversation with Tara, I know I personally would have been pulled into a very negative frame of mind.”

As I found out myself on my Wales south-north trip, this area has its share of really rough ground. It doesn't take much of this at the wrong time to impact, when one has a massive bag to carry. Mike then talks about the ascent of Moelwyn Bach as "Purgatory" whereas to Geoff it was "this mess". The next day with Tara tired out, Geoff's feet in pain, Chris's shoulders rubbed raw, and Mike also suffering, they wisely decided to call it a day.

Credit's due for writing about a great trip that didn't go quite as planned. I've done a lot of backpacking and I know how injuries just wreck you: on my own Welsh east-west trip in 2017, things went wrong in just one wet day, through getting literally bloody blisters on soaked feet in socks that weren't quite right. My crossing would have failed except for support from friends Hazel and Alasdair who came to walk with me, and altering plans so as to dump the backpack!

Members' backpacks took in formal long distance paths too. In April 2012 Bethan Hines and Steve Thomas backpacked the Offa's Dyke Path in a fast time of ten days, raising charity sponsorship money as well. In the April Newsletter, Beth's account shows they too had blister problems – Beth's blister was called "Bob"...

"Day 4..It rained pretty much all day...but we had a great day and walked 20 miles between Evenjobb and Hay on



Offa's Dyke Path: Bethan embraces the route

Wye. We treated ourselves to a bacon butty late breakfast stop in a great pub in Kington, the Swan, and ended up playing bagatelle with the owners. If you ever go past, you really should call in; a really quirky pub! [We] turned up at a friend's house for a very welcome, off the hill, shower and lovely meal. Bob was starting to grow and Steve's huge blisters later known as Tom, Dick and Harry were coming into their own!"

They enjoyed valued support from Club members and other friends, and had some very good days on the trail:

"Day 6 dawned and it looked like a brilliant day to walk from Lower Spoad near Newcastle/Clun to Buttington Bridge near Welsh-

pool, a total of 19 miles, including half of the 'switchback' section and a trip up Long Mountain! The 5 miles took an amazing 3 hours...ok we had a couple of breakfast stops but they really were tough little hills!... A flat middle section really helped with the pace and we completed the day in 8.5 hours. The views from Long Mountain were amazing and it was great looking at all the rain showers all around but they never caught us! We were also in for a surprise when we realised that the Beacon Ring was a hill fort! I tried to convince Steve that we should try to add on a couple more miles from the next day's quota...but after a total of 108 miles, the sensible thing was to go and get some rest and see if we could convince Nicky to do our washing!"

Success was celebrated with ice cream and champagne on Prestatyn beach.



Journey's end at Prestatyn

Ice cream would undoubtedly have melted on two other big LDP trips. Nearly a year earlier as recounted in the July 2011 Newsletter Chris and Janet Harris had done the GR20 in Corsica, north to south, in 15 days. 118 miles, 44,000' of ascent and horrible bits too:

"The Cirque de la Solitude (stage 4): Up at 5am, on the trail for 6am we arrived at the rim after a 2,500' climb in the cool light of dawn, on what could actually be recognised as a path. It was amazing, 1,000' of almost vertical scrambling and sliding down on chains. A man in a French group managed to get nearly to the bottom of the Cirque then stumbled, bounced a bit and twisted his ankle. A British Army guide checked him over, nothing broken but ankle swelling fast. Next thing we know a rescue helicopter comes in, drops paramedics, and then airlifts him out. Climbing out (see below) was hard work and a few more chains would have been nice. There is a lot of exposure."

Chris also writes:



Cirque de la Solitude – Janet climbing out

“The North (9 days) is amazingly tough walking, very remote and a lot of bare rock. The South (6 days) still includes some tough walking, but is much greener with cool shade in the forests with dramatic rock formations...

We felt we were doing a lot better than some. Two British army groups fell by the wayside early into the trek. One group of squaddies said they were there ‘to take them out of their comfort zone’ - most of them had been in Afghanistan!! They had to shorten their trip after one of the group slipped on day two whilst cooling off in the pools by the Spasimata slabs... apparently he was lucky to be alive. They followed us through the Cirque de la Solitude, some were complaining of ‘disco legs’. The other group were more officer material, also there ‘to take them out of their comfort zone’, last seen in the hotel at Castel di Vergio (stage 5), knocking back large volumes of wine.”

If that sounds hot and tough, consider the achievement of Dave Cole who in August 2014 returned from the USA having done 810 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail over eleven weeks, which I suspect is the longest long walk of anyone in the Club’s history.

Perhaps the nearest contender for that title was another foreign LDP, done nearly ten years earlier, Paul Smyth’s 600 mile trek over the GR11 in the Pyrenees in September 2005. Paul’s account is in “The Gwydyr 22” magazine, and brings out the mountainous character of the route:

“Over the next few weeks, I summited Perdido (3,355m) and Pico de Possets (3,375m) as I headed further east towards Andorra. The terrain became bleaker and water scarcer making it interesting to say the least. It was here that the snow arrived in force, beautiful, clean and bitterly cold. Aneto, the highest peak in the Pyrenees was to be my only failure, the weather and ice were to leave it glorious in defiance...”



Monte Perdido

In the most recent days, John Watson has been our star backpacker. He’s been doing long walks over the past six years which he recalled for me:

“I started off with the West Highland Way and have done a good number of the Scots long distance paths over the years. At the moment I’m planning on doing – as a section hike – the Cape Wrath Trail over a few trips.

Apart from the first one I’ve gone solo. A colleague and friend came with me – and since then I can’t find anyone to go with! My mate had to pull out and get the bus home, he lost his toenails when we got to Glencoe”.

John’s Scottish trails include the East Highland Way, Speyside Way, and Great Glen Way all done as a “combo meal” of 280 miles over a three week holiday.

“All my trips have been backpacking, wild camping most of the time. I’ll carry on in the day till I find a good place to stop or feel tired, trying not to overplan things. Less to go wrong in a way! Generally I’ll do about 20 miles in a day. You can also stop for longer if you find a nice site.

My best one was the Hebridean Way, done over two trips up from Vatersay along the islands chain up to the Butt of Lewis lighthouse. It was so remote, places as if time had stood still; and the people were so friendly, almost like

being on a different planet. My toughest days? Well on the Hebridean Way I had a lot of rain going up the Uists, and took to the road for a bit as the paths were so boggy. The hostel at Howmore was great, a lifesaver. I then spent a couple of days on the Tarbert campsite on Harris once I'd crossed over, to dry out and sort things out."

John's other backpacks have been the Arran Coastal Walk, and treks on Mull, the west coast of Orkney Mainland, and on Hoy. His latest backpack in 2019 was England coast to coast, by the Hadrian's Wall path, which he enjoyed just as much as his Scottish ventures.



Eh, Luxury. Helen in Ruigh Aiteachain bothy

wild for a couple of nights. We walked in to Ruigh Aiteachain bothy, selected for its possession of an actual loo of sorts, as well as its fine setting in the Caledonian Pines of Glen Feshie. We had deep stream crossings on the way in, and could not get the fire to light, or rather stay lit, on arrival. Nor could three members of London Fire Brigade, even by inverting their (lit!) gas stove under the fuel... We used the bothy as a base for a fine day on the Munro of Mullach Clach a Blair on the Cairngorm plateau.

Wilderness in its widest sense can be achieved other than in a tent. Consider bothying. Or maybe not some might say!

Bothies are remote buildings open to all, but for short stays and small groups only, except in emergencies. They have few facilities. In April 2011 I introduced Helen Bartlam to their delights, the trip was sheer luxury given we'd already been camping



Helen on the walk in

A couple steps up from Ruigh Aiteachain is the iconic Ling Hut, owned by the SMC, which Bill Morrison booked for us in April 2018. In the Newsletter of November 2019 Bill describes it:

"The hut is separated from the main road by a small lochan and can be accessed only on foot via a path that skirts the water. Consequently it feels suitably remote in keeping with its surroundings. The hut itself was basic but comfortable with a large bunk room, a dining room-cum- sitting area, a well equipped kitchen and a toilet. Sadly no wash block, if you wanted to scrub yourself you needed soap and a bucket!"



The Ling Hut from the walk in

Hey but it was all worth it! Right opposite the hut rose the wall of Liathach, while the windows looked out onto the hills of the Coulin Forest. It was there that Bill and Ronnie Davies tackled the first Munro of the trip. They ascended south direct from the Hut and the good path turned soon to bog...then

"We had made a late start on our first morning and by now it was early afternoon. However the cloudbase had lifted and we decided to summit Maol Chean Dearg (MCD). It was going to be a long day. Should we get caught out by either the weather or nightfall our back up plan was to use the Coire Fionnaraich bothy situated lower down in the valley. Close up MCD is revealed to be a steep sided dome of Torridonian sandstone. On

its north side it plunges via a series of crags and terraces down to a lochan. The normal walkers' path lies further south but given the time and having surveyed the route we decided to scramble up the north side of the mountain. At this point the weather was good and the scrambling fairly easy so with much traversing of the numerous sandstone terraces we eventually reached the mountain's crest and from there it was a quick walk to the summit.

On the top the air was clear and the light perfect, the views could only be described as staggering. In every direction there was a panorama of Scottish peaks. To the south we could see the mountains of Lochaber and pick out Ben Nevis and the Carn Mor Dearg arete - about 50 miles away as the crow flies. To the south west were the Skye Cuillin and northwards the snow capped peaks around Loch Fannich were bathed in afternoon sun.



Liathach from the Ling hut

They descended the west flank and after more bog picked up the good path back to the Hut and returned safe after a 13 hour day.

The next day was forecast fine and Bill and Ronnie were joined by Helen Grant for a traverse of the two Munros of Beinn Eighe. It was the second that caused hearts to flutter...

“We set off to climb the summit of Spidean Coire nan Clach - a pinnacle perched on a narrow stretch of the ridge. It was a short scramble to the top where we paused to take in the view and eat before setting off on our descent.

Sure enough we had to negotiate an ice sheet at the start... Although only it was only 10m or so wide, the ground was very steep and slippery under foot. In fact much of the upper path had been washed away, presumably by the melting winter snow, leaving behind deep gullies filled with loose rock and, at lower altitudes, patches of wet grasses to negotiate...these obstacles made the descent much harder than the climb up. It took about 90 mins or so to reach the road and by then...my toes were throbbing in my boots. Thankfully Glenn picked us up and spared us the march back to the hut. A great day out on the mountain. Beinn Eighe is much to be recommended.”

Bill, Ronnie and Lindsey Fooks ascended Slioch too. Lindsey, Glenn and Helen Grant, Kay and Richard Smith and I also did, in various combinations, a number of low level walks and also some rugged and remote lower hills – namely An Ruadh Mheallan, (2,201’) Beinn A Cherchail (2,378’) and Beinn a Mhuinidh (2,270’). It was also great to drop in a have chat with John Beamer in his cosy loch side cottage.

Oh, I nearly forgot the promised black humour! In 2003 I walked across England east-west, from Whitby to Ravenglass and, per “The Gwydyr 20” magazine:

“The end of day 4 on hard farm tracks [in the Vale of Mowbray] saw me at an early low point, feet blistered and body slumped, against...a roadbridge over the East Coast Main Line. A gruff Yorkshireman stopped his 4x4 behind me and growled “Tha’d save a lot of walking if tha’ just jumped!”

A moment that I suspect comes to most backpackers, but on this trip like so many of the others we’ve seen in this section, the overall experience was very rewarding indeed. I was lucky, the Yorkshireman clearly had healing powers and the blisters went the next day!

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