

SECTION 11:

“Variety Is The Spice Of Life”: An Interest In Mountains



Up in Scotland, the heavily bearded SMC, that nation’s august “senior club” has long looked back to its Yachting Meet of 1897 as a seminal moment in its history. Can the GMC compare? Huh! Of course! With our broad remit of promoting “an interest in mountains” we can easily trump everyday things like yachting meets. We field amongst other things boat-lifting meets, gardening meets, trainspotting meets, “first Welsh man-powered flight”, meets...and more. So read on to sample the variety of interests in the mountains we’ve indulged, either on actual Club meets or members’ own trips.

I guess first up in terms of scale is cycling, which divides naturally into off-road and on-road biking. For one thing, many of today’s most active members started out on wheels, and then branched out into walking and climbing in the Club, whilst retaining their original interest. Following that up takes us to the on-road side of cycling.



Chris on Mont Ventoux

In the September 2011 Newsletter Chris Harris reported that:

“I took a day off from the week of walking in Provence to do some real Mountain biking. I hired a bike (a carbon fibre Scott CR1) to climb 6,273 ft of Mont Ventoux, 13 miles of uphill pedalling! Cruising speed on the descent was 40mph. We took the long route down via gorges and lavender fields and ended up doing dead on 100km. [I had to wear] walking gear rather than Lycra, it flaps about a bit and slows you down on the down-hills.”

Mont Ventoux is one of the most gruelling stages of the Tour de France and has featured on the route fifteen times since 1951. 100k is 62.5 miles so a long day as well as a steep one.

Our most regular cycling, in the sense of there being an actual meet on the programme, is the Ride Out to the Chapel. These happened in a number of years towards the end of our period the latest being in 2019, and typically involved cycling members and their buddies riding out to the Hut to stay, and back the next day, usually with a van to support the ride.

Again, we turn to Chris and the May 2013 Newsletter for an insight into this trip:

“The planning was relatively easy as we used the previously tried and tested route (thanks Graham [James]). The early forecasts were for a cold and wet weekend but we arrived at The Eureka Cafe under grey cloud and the day gradually improved but it was still cold.

Ten of us started with a gentle descent to the River Dee which was soon followed by the long climb, first to Northop then on and up to Pentre Halkyn where we had to head west along the ridge into the biting NW wind.

Then it was a rolling ride through quiet country lanes followed by a massive descent to the Salusbury Arms at Tremerchion. Most ate sandwiches by the church yard, and then went inside for a warm drink or a drink in the warm.



Ride out to the Chapel – the return leg begins

After lunch we crossed the Vale of Clwyd and ‘enjoyed’ numerous hills to Llansannan and Llangernyw until we arrived at Llanrwst where we had a welcome coffee break at the lovely Ty Hwnt I’r Bont café.

After this point the trio of mad mountain bikers took to the hills to do the Marin Trail before nightfall. The rest of us took the easier route into Betws-y-Coed and up the hill to the chapel.

After a dinner and drinks in the Tyn y Coed...Sunday was a bit brighter with a suggestion that the sun might actually make an appearance...for the hard section of

the return journey, a 5 mile pedal uphill to Pentrefoelas, and another climb onto Denbigh moors. It was made worthwhile by the long, fast descent down the B4501 into Denbigh where we lunched in style at Morrisons, some dined Al Fresco in the delightful carpark.

The climb from Tremerchion was tough but once that was over we soon gained sight of Wirral in the sunshine. Another big descent to Connah’s Quay and we were soon back on familiar ground.”

Long distance road trips were not just the preserve of relatively new members. Paul and Lin Jensen have been in the Club since the early days and have done a lot of cycling. In the spring of 2012 they took on the cross country Morecambe to Bridlington “Way of the Roses”, which weighs in at 188 miles. Overall it was an enjoyable experience, written up by Lin in the May/Jun 2012 Newsletter

“As with all cross country routes, either walking or cycling you are recommended to travel from West to East to take advantage of westerly winds. Unfortunately we were buffeted by strong north easterlies all the way! Added to that we probably experienced our worst ever riding conditions on Sunday 29 April when the whole country was deluged by torrential rain. We had to ride! Hostel was booked, train was booked, I couldn’t change the itinerary.

In the 50 miles from Pateley Bridge to York we stopped twice and saw nothing! We were even forced off the cycle route before we got to the city because of flooding. We arrived at the hostel two shivering wrecks.

But the next day the sun shone and the rest of the journey was a real pleasure. We finished on the prom in Bridlington and rewarded ourselves with fish and chips.

Our accommodation included two pubs, a guesthouse, a hostel and a Travelodge”

After only four days rest the Jensens mounted up once again, I’m guessing with heavier panniers, for a three day cycle camping tour on the Fylde Coast and around the River Wyre, with Margaret Blakeborough, Graham James, and Debbie and Keith Taverner!

In 2018 Steve Birch and Jane Webster also crossed England by bike, taking the more southerly Trans Pennine Trail. This runs from Southport to Hornsea and is 215 miles long. The pair did the ride over four full days staying in B&Bs. Jane commented to me:

“The highlight of the trip was I guess day three, going up and over the Woodhead Pass, hard going obviously and we did *not* cycle up the pass. It’s really the day in open country and in April, just at the start of spring and with the good weather we had, amazing! The lowlight was Hull city centre where the council had painted in the lamp posts and erased the cycling signs. We were totally lost and had to use Google Maps in the end.”

We’ll now turn to off-road mountain biking which has been an interest throughout our period for several members. With plenty of forest trails plus the Marin Trail near to the hut that’s not surprising perhaps. Let’s look at two sample days. And with our first we do mean MOUNTAINS. Mike Dagley’s self-styled “decent epic” crossing from Blair

Atholl to Braemar by Glen Tilt, the Garbh Buidhe (trans: "rough 'n' yellow") pass, and Glens Geldie and Dee. In other words thirty miles right through the south Cairngorms, and done in a single day in early June 2000, then showcased in "The Gwydyr 17" magazine.

"I have the unfortunate knack of failing to attend friends' weddings, but when I saw 'Braemar' on the invitation I knew I just couldn't afford to miss the wonderful excuse for a trip north."

Mike went to Blair Atholl by train and met the first crux immediately:

"Getting off the platform...proved my first challenge. There was no subway or crossing path, just an old iron foot-bridge. I noticed how steep were the steps and looked at my normally superlight...bike currently submerged by tent, camping gear, and a pair of bulging panniers...I was glad there was no one to witness my struggle. I reached the far side, and had a puncture...the rear wheel...it's always the rear wheel..."

Glen Tilt then went smoothly on estate roads until...

"I left behind the last stunted trees...and I neared the confluence of the Tarf and Tilt. The broad track shrank to a hill path... My path led up above the Garbh Buidhe and pushing, pulling and lifting replaced smooth pedalling as I couldn't get a rhythm over these heathery slopes. I didn't much fancy being pitched head first into the trench...But the weather remained a delight."

After about four hard miles Mike crested the pass and across the watershed found a track above Bynack Lodge:

"To match my feeling of 'breaking on through to the other side' the broadening vista of the high Cairngorms was glorious. There wasn't a soul in miles, and here I could gaze at the backs of Beinn Bhrotain and MacDuibh, with their extensive snowfields evoking the remoteness of this lovely place. I had reached old Bynack and its little stand of pines."

Mike reached his goal, a pint with his friends in the Fife Arms after more miles and a couple of river crossings.

Falling off bikes seems to be a relatively common occurrence – to my knowledge three members at least have achieved man-powered flight, with varying levels of consequent injury. This was a risk courted by our second intrepid mountain biker, Geoff Brierley, in Beddgelert Forest, recorded in "The Gwydyr 24" magazine of summer 2008:

"Beddgelert had been patiently waiting in the wings for six months. Earlier in the week, I had spoken to a person at Coed y Brenin about this trail, and their reaction had concerned me when they suggested that there wasn't much left of this circuit. I had hoped that this wouldn't be the case, although at the same time I wondered how a trail could 'have little left'. Had someone popped in to the forest perhaps and thought, oooh, that bit of rock strewn path would go well with the azaleas.....I think I'll cart that off back to the car in my rather fortuitously empty rucksack? What could have been taken away or now be missing? Or is it simply that the trail had fallen into disrepair through lack of use?"

After some uncertain navigation and initial steep climbs...

"After only a few more minutes of this the...bike and I dropped like a stone, instantaneously our speed picked up out of nowhere and I found it harder and harder to keep the speed under control. Down this track we hurtled, and with the lack of any restraint on speed, my control over the bike and our course started to slip too, worrying in the best of circumstances, but now as the track offered me only narrow ruts to cycle down, my concern was that the bike would shift its heading slightly, we would bounce off the side of the rut, and then with what I'm sure to any onlooker would appear like consummate ease, I would probably take a brief flying lesson with my crossbar being a likely landing strip. It turned out that I would be spared this particular fate and at its end the track forked and I came to a stop here with the smell of my brakes wafting past me.

A cycle along from the end of the descent and I found my way turned left off down onto a section of single track.

This particular section was not, however, singletrack in any sense already experienced anywhere else. This was... special. It was a truly testing experience, it left no room for error, it was undoubtedly the most technical single track I believe I have ever ridden. This trail had you cycling through a stream in places, flying down the track else-

where, and in other sections you were required to haul back on the brakes and tease your bike through a particularly tricky section.”

After emergency repairs to a broken derailleur Geoff finished the trail, and concludes...

“Beddgelert forest is a superb track with probably the best section of technical singletrack I have ever ridden, go there and try it, it really is worth it.”



Geoff's revenge – with Reg on Beinn Alligin

Geoff gave me my funniest bike moment. On the 2012 Torridon trip we'd run him and Reg Cromer by car to the boggy summit of a vicious, hilly, single track road to start an epic road bike day. Reg's chain immediately came off: he struck a suitably 17th century ducal swagger portrait pose and waved vaguely in Geoff's direction. Geoff then began an accusatory, swearing, wrestling, oily tussle in the bog pools to replace the chain. What cracked the rest of us up into real hysterics though, in the middle of Geoff's bike rage, was the surreal sight of the Mobile Council Library gamely cresting the summit and powering ahead into the wilderness..." You'd better hurry!" we cried!



“Follow that Library!”



Geoff in pursuit, warp factor 7



And Reg too...on Impulse Power

Let's swap wheely epics for watery ones. Canoeing is popular with many members and there've been a number of good trips over the years. Pride of place goes to Adele Blakeborough who with her team mate Jean completed the Easter 2013 Devizes to Westminster race. This is a 125 mile canoeing and running “ultra-marathon”, and is the longest canoe race in the world. The story from their charity sponsor's newsletter is in Apr/May 2013 Newsletter:

“Jean and Adele battled against sub zero conditions after leaving Devizes at 11.20 on Saturday. They faced strong easterly winds, minus 4 degrees temperatures which iced up their kayak, drink systems, life jackets and pogies [gloves]. It was strong determination that got them to Westminster Bridge on Sunday...They came 22nd out of 160 starters, they finished in an incredible 22 hours 19 minutes, placed 2nd ladies team, winning the Ladies Veterans Trophy. Jean said ‘It was certainly an amazing journey, with good times and dark times along the way’”



Adele and Jean win their medals

If the date of February 2014 is right (it was in the March Newsletter) then it must also have been Shearer Shirt Cold for Doug Florence and Gail Smith who were reported to have been kayaking the Tees and Wear.

In July of that year Margaret Blakeborough and Graham James did a wonderful four night wilderness canoe camping trip in the North West Highlands, as part of a bigger journey up there. They launched their open Canadian canoe onto the Cam Loch near Elphin, and quickly faced a difficult portage to avoid a serious waterfall. After camping nearby, they travelled the length of Loch Veyatie to a camp just above the Fionn Loch to a site under Sulven, with a great view of Stac Pollaidh. Sadly, Margaret had left behind her walking poles so Graham made the ascent of Sulven alone. Retracing the route out, the river section was so low they had to tow the boat back at times on a line.

Margaret and Graham later returned to the far North West to sea kayak to the Summer Isles, and to climb Stac Pol-

laidh.

Rather more laid back than all the above was Anna Robert's Lake Windermere Camping Meet in June 2016. This was built around a canoeing and paddle boarding race event, but with other stuff too! In that month's newsletter Anna reported:

"Friday Dave Gray and Jane [Webster] arrived first and did well to bag us a beautiful lakeside spot. Myself and



Lakeshore living

Mike [Dagley] following shortly afterwards and Charlotte, Max and Millie [McCoy] not far behind to enjoy their first camping trip. With sunset being so late we had a great evening getting our pitches set up and making dinner, discussing everyone's plans for the weekend.

On Saturday Christy [Miles] arrived bright and early and joined Dave G and Jane on a walk [up Harrison Stickle] that involved an obligatory 'off the hill' drink in The Old Dungeon Ghyll. Melinda and Richard [Kinsman] arrived and swiftly headed off to Wallow Barrow Crag and completed a 2- star severe route named 'Thomas' with Melinda leading two pitches graded 4b.

Mike set off in his beautiful handmade boat, named 'Lynne,' ready for the boat race of the year!!! With supporters on the lakeside ready to cheer him over the finish line. Although he didn't win, he did give the infamous Torduff brothers a run for their money!

Charlotte, Max, Millie and myself spent the day in and on top of the lake with lots of swimming and trying out various different vessels that the organisers had brought for people to try! Kayaking a firm favourite for Max; and Millie is now asking for a stand up paddle board for her birthday...

For the evening we had set up a gazebo, BBQ and fairy lights to celebrate a successful day of sunshine and smiles. Dave G did a great job in perfecting our skimming stones whilst the sun was setting



Mike's boat the "Lynne"



Christy ready for the race

Sunday it was Christy's turn to part take in the boat race (five miles) where she came first in her category so won a medal!!! She also had to practice her survival skills and help a fellow [stand up paddleboarder] who fell in the water and couldn't get back on her board.

The rest of us had another chance to get free use of boats again or squeeze in some more walking before heading off home. Using Mike's words to sum the weekend up: 'Great weekend at Fell Foot. Thanks to everyone for coming along and making it a fun time. More like a holiday than a weekend: sunshine, warm water and a restful

campsite, and a couple of races survived."

[Author's note – Mike's boat is named after his late wife Lynne, a delightful lady and great friend of the Club.]

In the early days of the Club, caving was quite a prominent activity, but over the years tailed off. Recently there's been interest in a revival. Doug Florence and Gail Smith organised a mixed caving/walking meet in the Yorkshire Dales in the July of 2017, with about ten of us based on a convenient hut at Greenclose near Clapham.



Gail on the caving meet

The cavers did Yordas Cave, having had to abandon a trip down Valley Entrance in Kingsdale after the first descent because of high water levels. The walkers had days out on Whernside and in the vast limestone pavement area around Austwick. Sadly a caving meet scheduled for 2020 is falling victim to Covid 19 at the time of writing.



Cordon Bleu Sue

Over the years Sue Taylor has run some very convivial and successful canal barge breaks for Club members. Usually in the autumn, when getting up early on a misty day in the middle of nowhere can be very atmospheric. In the summer of 2012 a group of us had a trip starting from Preston Brook on the Trent and Mersey Canal, and heading south. For me there were two highlights.

The first was the rediscovery of the “Tunstall Tortilla”. A breakfast, lunch or snack dish consisting of bacon and melted cheese inside a Staffordshire oatcake. Sue makes marvellous examples. The oatcake is a soft savoury wrap: I’ve tried without success to buy them on Wirral, I think one must have to go to a “dealer”!

Second and better still was a diversion down the unique Anderton boatlift, for a tentative trip on the slightly scary Weaver Navigation (without the compulsory navigation lights and anchor!) and back again. The incredible boat-



Into the Anderton Boat Lift

lift lifts and lowers canal boats in counter balanced tanks, by hydraulic power. A “lifetime tick.”

A couple of Sue’s other canal trips have been in hilly areas which mean lots of interesting locks to work. We have done the summit



Inside the Boat Lift

section of the Leeds-Liverpool canal, and also crossed Pontcysyllte Aqueduct on the Shropshire Union.

At the other end of the hill scale are the Himalayas, and that’s the background to the “gardening meets”. We’ve had “meets of one” so this counts! Since 2015 or so Paul Sinclair has been lead Wirral Ranger on a project to restore and enhance The Breck in Wallasey. I work as one of his volunteers and in around 18 months we got the site from quite considerable neglect to Green Flag Award status: improvements continued and continue now.



Unveiling the plaque
(Paul Sinclair background on right)

Several of the Club’s older members regularly climbed there, including local boy Alan Rouse, one of the UK’s leading climbers. In June 2018 Paul, his colleagues and volunteers completed the renovation of the old garden area at the base of the site, where a blue plaque was unveiled by Brian Hall and Rab Carrington, in memory of their friend Alan. Several members were with us at the ceremony.

I promised you a trainspotting meet! So let’s finish with that. It’s recorded in “The Gwydyr 31” of September 2012 that Roger Hughes led a group of members and friends on an imaginative Tour du Snowdonia by rail. The route they took was Heswall Hills (departing at 7.39), Wrexham, Shrewsbury, Dovey Junction, Barmouth (for chips), Porthmadog, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Llandudno Junction, Shotton, and Heswall Hills (arriving at 20.29). Roger writes:

“The 1 hour 59 minutes in Barmouth was sensibly divided between the Tal y Don Hotel, the Last Inn and the fish and chip takeaway, and a suitably rejuvenated team reassembled on the platform to catch the next train north. A 28 minute delay was announced, but this was received stoically, it merely enabled Judy [Hughes] and Sue [Taylor] to go paddling, and the rest of us to enjoy an ice cream in the sun.



The team on the Railtour

On up the coast we went, passing below Harlech castle where the train again filled up as school finished (early?) for the day, and catching views of Portmerion and Snowdon itself across Traeth Bach. We crossed Afon Dwyryd alongside the toll road and then Afon Glaslyn, past Tremadoc cliffs and into the top end of Portmadoc town where we allowed the train to continue without us to Pwllheli. A brisk walk through the town ensured time for a pint at the railway buffet before we joined the narrow gauge Ffestiniog Railway.

This part of the journey was undoubtedly the highlight. The views back down the estuary as we slowly climbed to Blaenau Ffestiniog were nothing short of spectacular, and the journey was made special by the

announcement of Mike Davies’ 65th birthday and the production of 6 bottles of red wine (with plastic glasses) which he had so thoughtfully carried all day. A memorable journey indeed!”

So we’re leaving a very wide ranging interest in mountains, beyond walking and climbing, on a suitable note of celebration.

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