

SECTION 14

“Happy Birthday”: The Club’s 50th



We debated long and hard over what to do to celebrate the Club’s 50th birthday. We’d already had special trips to mark our 25th, 30th, and 40th anniversaries. In an earlier section we’ve looked at the special dinner we had in the March of 2017; this section will cover the two trips that emerged, one to Loch Ossian in the May, and the second larger expedition to Sikkim slightly earlier on in the April.

LOCH OSSIAN

As for the 30th anniversary in 1997, a choice suited the members better than a single goal. For those of us who for whatever reason didn’t fancy or couldn’t make the Sikkim expedition, Margaret Blakeborough had a brilliant idea: a trip to an iconic Scots Youth Hostel by train, as a venue for a celebratory walking/climbing meet. Her initial goal was Carbisdale Castle, but we missed the boat. The castle was too expensive for the SYHA to maintain and was up for sale. So plans shifted to Loch Ossian, which is an equally iconic “Eco-Hostel”, located right on a loch shore at the northern edge of Rannoch Moor, surrounded by mountains. You can’t get in by car!



Beth inspects the trolleys, Loch Ossian

Margaret did the leg-work and booked us in for four nights in the hostel, a big enough party to give us de facto exclusive use of the place. She also came up with the breakthrough idea of how to get sufficient supplies into base, We would use backpacks but also shopping trolleys on the one mile landrover track from the station! Reg Cromer and I were going on to Skye afterwards so pitched up at Bridge of Orchy station, as did Glenn and Helen Grant. When we got on the train for Corroul, the highest main-line station in Britain, we joined the others in the party. Margaret, Ray Baines, Geoff Brierley, Adrian Dolan, Bryan and Mike

Gilbert, Linda and Tom Humphreys (plus friend), Graham James, Beth Roberts, Richard and Kay Smith, Sue Taylor, and Nome Warner. They’d had a successful train journey all the way from home.

So soon a line of trolleys was trekking east into the Highlands... Nome and I both had very big backpacks so we could stay cool looking, sans trolley. The Hostel was clean and well organised, and well run too by friendly volunteer wardens. The setting is superb, on the loch shore with views of loch and mountain to both east and west.



East from Loch Ossian to Ben Alder

It had eco-toilets to preserve the environment – US style composting long drops – not the place to take your car keys! We soon got used to them – Helen Grant commented:

“You could tell the people who had just come back from Sikkim who thought the toilets were great!”



Setting off from the hostel

Like on any meet we split into various groups. Beth, Reg and I were the day one B-team, and we went up the munro of Beinn na Lap (3,066') in lovely weather with Kim and Susie, the Warden's daughter and young granddaughter. We were rewarded with fine views, from Ben Alder to Ben Nevis, and seeing a ptarmigan mother, confident in her camouflage, on the nest a couple of yards from the path.

We were pursued by two men plus dog, one clearly at a half mile distance looking big, rugged and fast, and one small and trailing behind slow. Beth and I created fantasy Scotsmen with voices too – “Square jawed Finlay McTaggart and his dog Grip, and his sidekick Wee Scot Scottie.” When Finlay powered past he joined in the joke - he was Scottish but called Luigi, being of Italian descent! We

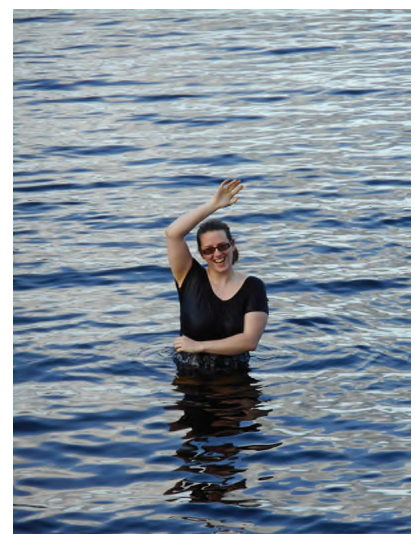
made it back to the hostel just before rain came in, and found that the A-team had been successful on the munros of Sgor Gaibhre (3,124') and Carn Dearg (3,080') south of the Loch.

Day two was lovely, increasing warm and sunny. The A-team achieved a massive day, Ben Alder (3,765') from Loch Ossian, and on the return Richard nobly accelerated ahead to get beer orders for them, in the bar in the station café. The great Scots writer W.H. Murray described Ben Alder in his wonderful book “Undiscovered Scotland” thus: “Of all the remote un-get-at-able mountains in Scotland, Ben Alder ranks among the first.” From the internet, their day was around 22 miles with over 4,200' of ascent.



Nome above Glen Nevis, the Mamores in background

We of the B-team, this time Beth, Nome and me, took it a bit easier with a longish trek on mostly good tracks round to Loch Treig and towards the head of Glen Nevis, to the beautiful Abhainn Rath river near Staoineag Bothy. We went up and down the Graham of Creag Ghuanach (2,027') that forms a rugged prow over Loch Treig and gave us views ranging from Ben Alder west to Glencoe, Ben Nevis, the Mamores and the Grey Corries ranges. Nome and I swam in the river on the way back – Beth waited till she got home and cooled off in the



Beth swimming, Loch Ossian

Loch itself!

We mixed the teams up a bit more on day three, and eight of us went up Leum Uilleim (2,972'), a Corbett to the west of the Loch beyond Corroul station. We had a cloudy, misty day and some rain, the main interest was in the navigation, also in birdlife: skylarks, ptarmigan (laughing their heads off gutturally at us!) and golden plovers with their lonely calls. We finished up in the bar at the café.

In walking terms the last day was showery and windy: Glenn, Helen and I did the circuit of the Loch, and were rewarded by seeing a pair of mergansers on the water. And the café was the scene for a great group meal that evening, a suitably remote spot to celebrate both the Club's 50th, and a fantastic meet. I had wanted to return to Loch Ossian

for many years and was very grateful to Margaret for making it happen.



West to Leum Uilleim from SYHA Loch Ossian



50th Dinner, Corroul station café

Now for the Mysteries of the East and the Sikkim Expedition!

SIKKIM

This account draws exclusively on the “Sikkim Expedition Newsletter” of 2017 and I’ve broadly stuck to its themes.

Scope, Planning and Preparation

Roger Hughes explained the shape and objectives of an expedition which was three - four years in the planning and preparation:

“As early as 2013 members started to talk about the club’s 50th anniversary in 2017 and there was a definite wish to mark the year with a major trip... The club had gone to Nepal in spring 1992 for the club’s 25th anniversary, and it seemed logical to go back. Sikkim as a location had been mentioned, and the fact that the Everest expeditions of 1921, 1922 and 1924 all went through Darjeeling and Gangtok before crossing from Sikkim into Tibet was a draw.”

Those expeditions had included local heroes Mallory and Irvine and

“That gave Sikkim extra appeal, and the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal made it very difficult to look at Nepal as an alternative.”

In June 2014 Roger organised a meeting at which 26 members expressed potential interest. He then went on to re-search trek providers and it was settled that Cartreks, Doug Scott’s company, would organise the trip, and gather the various service providers to deliver the goods. As an example of the issues involved:

“Ramish [from the UK specialist travel company] came across to Birkenhead one Tuesday evening in November 2016, took individual photos of all the party, filled in the visa forms for us, took copies of all our passports so that we didn’t have to part with them, and then disappeared back to Manchester with £70 from each of us. In March 2017, they supplied each of us with the necessary Indian visas - an incredibly painless way of dealing with the visa issue!”

In Sikkim we used local firm Adarsh Trekking. In terms of the mountaineering itself, the expedition had two objectives:

“It had been agreed at the start that whilst a number of the group were happy with a reasonably serious trek, there were some who were looking for a bigger challenge. The idea was to find a peak of 20,000ft or so that was not too technical and which was near enough to where we wanted to trek. [After two years of research and consultation] the route was settled - a trek to the Goeche La, with Mt Thinchinang at 6,010m the target peak. Whilst we understood that Thinchinang was very much more than a trekking peak, we felt that with extra climbing support from experienced Sherpas we could attempt it.”

Famously HW Tilman recommended planning expeditions on the back of an envelope. Not sure I believe that one!

The editor wrote:

“All of us who went on the trip would like to say a huge thank you to Roger for the immense effort that he put in on our behalf in organizing this trip. It was in large part due to Roger’s excellent planning that the trip went so well, and we all had such a memorable experience.”

To Sikkim

The party left the UK on 14 April 2017, with a return date of 7 May. There were twenty members who would do the trek of whom seven would go on to attempt the peak. The journey was long, via Abu Dhabi, an overnight in Delhi airport, and then on to Badogra in West Bengal before a six hour drive in 4x4s to Gangtok, capital of Sikkim.

There they had three days rest, although David Lane-Joynt suffered an injury when a car ran over his foot in chaotic traffic conditions; he kept calm and carried on. The expedition created more of a stir locally than we expected!



The press conference

Again Roger Hughes writes:

“Day four started with a press conference, where our expedition climbing leader Richard Smith was interviewed for the Sikkim newspapers. After the now obligatory group photos against an expedition banner, it was off again on crazy roads to Yuksom, another 6 hour journey.

Yuksom was to be the base for the expedition and on arrival we met our porters, cooks and guides at the Hotel Tashi Ghang, ready to start out in earnest on day 5.”

The Trek

The trek started auspiciously - as Chris Harris writes:

“Trek day 1. It would not be a Himalayan trek without the prayers so we had lots of chanting, burning of Juniper and the sacrifice of half a bottle of brandy - very atmospheric.”

The Gods though clearly were reserving some of their powers that day...

“A steady climb up through the forest to a camp on a shelf in the forest at Sachen. David L-J provided the entertainment by shaving his leg in preparation for Doug applying a serious bit of strapping. Glenn managed to break a chair at dinnertime. I accidentally killed a moth which Sue [Taylor] told me was a sin and that we would all die.”

The first week of the trek involved an overall climb, sometimes steady, sometimes steep through forested country.

This involved the classic scenes of wire bridges, porters in crocs, and campsites both civilised and “rather poo-ey”. Now Helen Grant writes:

“As we gained altitude on the trek we started to see the Sikkim rhododendrons discovered by the famous plant hunter Sir Joseph Hooker in the mid nineteenth century. Many of these were the size of trees and at times we were walking through rhoddie forests. In amongst them there were also tree magnolias and mountain primula. As we trekked higher the landscape changed to vast forests of Hemlock pines and then to moraine and glacier.”



Mount Pandim (6,691m) above hemlock pines



Pink Rhododendron Falconeri

Wild life was a highlight especially for keen birder Richard Smith:

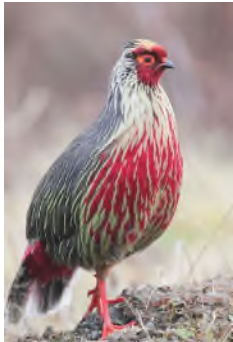
“We stopped for lunch on day 2 of the trek at a shack, which sold inflated packets of crisps and coca cola bottles. We [had] excellent views of a Verditer Flycatcher, a dazzling turquoise bird flitting amongst the bamboo canes. Also, a Gold-billed Magpie 50% larger than our European magpie with a long tail and a yellow bill.



Verdita Flycatcher



Gold Billed Magpie



Blood Pheasant

The following day, as we climbed higher towards 4000m at Dzongri, a pair of Blood Pheasants (left) emerged out of the mist. This is the national bird of Sikkim and is very tame”

Further birdlife seen later on the climb including Lammergeier and White Capped Redstarts plus possible sightings of large Himalayan Vultures.

The needs of sport were not neglected either:

“The following day a few of us were coerced into a cricket match against the Sherpas at an altitude of over 4,000m and running round the boundary was far from restful.”

A week out unfortunately Pete Smedley felt unwell and had to stop two days out from the end of the trek and await the return party. As Chris again recalls this was the main parting of the ways too:

“Kochurung to Lamuney, and mountain group up to Base Camp: The dawn broke sunny and freezing, some managed to wash their hair. After breakfast we had the group photo taken as it was possibly the last time we were all together. Then an emotional farewell to Pete...



Group photo at Kochurung
Click on photo for enlarged photo with names

On and up we walked, passing through Thangsing where we would stay on the way back. At Lamuney, the mountaineers headed up to base camp so it was an emotional farewell for me and Janet and for Richard and Kay.”

The high point of the trek came the next day:

“The Trekking Group made an early start at 3 am to set off for their high point (4,984 m) at the Goecha La viewing point, where they were hoping for a spectacular view of Mt Kangchenjunga. As they ascended, most of them

were really feeling the altitude, and so considered that they had done enough to reach the first viewing point. An intrepid three (Doug [Florence], Sue and Adele [Blakeborough]), decided to press on to the second viewing point, where they were rewarded by magnificent views of Mt Kangchenjunga.”



A break on the way up



On the way to the second viewing point

The Climb

David Lane-Joynt takes up the story of the climbing party:

“The...team was Helen and Glenn Grant, Chris Harris, David Lane-Joynt, John Simpson, Richard Smith and Alan Thomas [a friend of the Club].

As we headed off for base camp in rather dreary weather, it was with a mixture of excitement and some trepida-



Richard, John, Glenn, Helen and Chris at Base Camp
Kanchenjunga in background

tion. Were we up to climbing the mountain, as we had seen some photos of people on very steep rock?

Under Sanjeev we had grown used to his trademark “No hurry, no worry” slogan but clearly this did not apply now, as we soon had to ask our head Sherpa Tashi to give us a bit more time. Before long however, we were at Base Camp, where it had all been set up for us. That evening Tashi led up us the initial slopes towards Camp 1, before returning to Base Camp for the night.

It was cold at night, and the tent zip had frozen up so I had trouble getting out. But when I did, the view was just jaw-dropping. It had been poor visibility the day before, but now we had a magnificent view of the Kangchenjunga

peaks, and the cameras went into overdrive, as we all wanted our photo against that background”

The next two days were spent acclimatising, with some up and down moves to “climb high, sleep low”, the route including the crossing of a nasty boulder field. The original way up to the glacier had was not possible because of climate change and the party would have to follow a new route prospected by the Sherpas. The last night with the porter support was at camp 1. From then...

“We were now on our own for the summit ascent, as the porters would not go above the snow line. The Sherpas would carry the tents to Camp 2, and Helen and I had our sleeping bags carried as well. But everything else we had to carry. Weighed down with two litres of water together with all my gear, I could barely lift my sack, and looked very dubiously at the scramble over the boulders on the way up. Alan very generously offered to carry a water bottle for me, for which I was very grateful. It still seemed a long way up the boulder field again to the base of the



Approaching Camp 1 (at 5,000m)

snow line. It was to seem a lot longer on the way down.

The further up the glacier we climbed, the worse the visibility got. We were assured that Camp 2 was not very far, but when you cannot see very much ‘not very far’ can seem a long way. Eventually Camp 2 emerged out of the mist. The Sherpas had cut a small platform out of the glacier ice on which to place the high mountain tents. We had to be careful getting in to the tents, as there was quite a drop onto the glacier just outside the entrance. Supper was “boil in a bag” curry which is an acquired taste. After that I settled down to a very cold night trying pretty unsuccessfully to sleep before the 3 am call at the start of the



Camp 2 the next morning after the weather cleared

summit days. I was wearing every bit of clothing that I had brought including my down jacket and was inside a sleeping bag, another inner sleeping bag and a silk liner. I was still cold...



The morning view of Mt Pandim from Camp 2

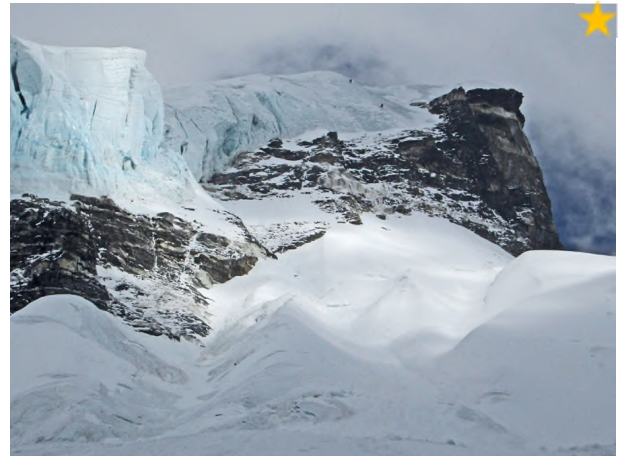
During the night the wind got up and it started to snow. Things were not looking good for our summit push. At 3 am the Sherpa brought us tea, and by this stage Richard as our climbing leader was in discussion with Tashi. Reluctantly the decision was taken that we would descend. Some of the party were really feeling the altitude, and not up to continuing, and we did not have the resources for some to continue and others to descend. It was the right decision, much as I would have liked to have been the oldest to climb Mt Thinchin-chang.”

The descent is half the mountain and this one had its challenges:

“By morning the wind had abated and it had stopped snowing as we started the descent down the glacier. The new snow had covered up the crevasses that we had jumped over the day before, so we were all roped up.

The overnight snow meant that we had to be very careful on the descent, as the snow-line was now down below Camp 1, and everything had become very slippery. We abseiled down the...scramble below the glacier, and then the fun really began as we started to descend the boulder field above Camp 1. I was struggling with next to no grip on large boulders and a heavy pack on my back...

As we pushed on down to Base Camp, the weather closed in again, and we carefully descended the very steep and slippery grass slopes. It was a tired group that evening. We had not reached the summit, and it had been the right decision to come down, but we had all had an amazing experience which we will remember for a long time. It was not bad to reach nearly 19,000 ft after all.”



The upper part of Mt Thinchin-chang . Click the image to see our Sherpas and for more detail on our route

David emphasised the contribution of...

“Our wonderful support team, without which our ascent would not have been possible. They were unfailingly cheerful, and did their very best to ensure that we all had a truly memorable experience.”

Sightseeing

After a two day return trek, the climbers followed the trekking party a day behind. Both groups visited the sights of



Yuksom monastery
Janet Harris and Mike McEneaney in front

Yuksom, which was the first royal capital of Sikkim from 1642.

The whole party reconvened in Darjeeling for a few final days sightseeing.

They variously took in tea tasting, a visit to a tea plantation, the famous Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, and the Tensing



Pete Smedley and Sonam, Yuksom
(Just posing I think)

exhibition at Himalayan Mountaineering Institute.
And finally some sightseeing photos from Darjeeling



Angela Price and Hew McDermott at the tea plantation in Darjeeling



Hew, Sue Taylor, Angela and Adele Blakeborough trying out the local costumes

CONCLUSION

So on many levels including these two trips, 2017 was a truly successful and memorable year and proved a Happy Birthday for the Club

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