

SECTION 1:

“Bedrock” I: Walking Day Trips



I guess in terms of miles, height, rubber on both boots and car tyres - and thirsts generated - UK hill, mountain and coastal walking is our biggest activity. It forms the bedrock of what we currently – and have to date, done as a Club. So it’s a good place to start our story.

Though we’re spread right across the UK, most of our members are based in North West England or North Wales and we’re lucky to have easy access to some fantastic walking areas.

Walking tends to be less sensitive to current and recent weather and to ability level, when compared to say outdoor rock climbing or cycling, which makes trips easier to organise and plan well in advance. It’s also reasonably easy to cope with flexible numbers on the day – I’ve seen successful walks with participant numbers from the ramblersque high twenties (body counts, back markers, synchronised loo stops and all that!) to the very occasional but infamous “meets of one”. I had a solo billy no mates ascent of Cross Fell at one time - it was my party and I cried if I wanted to! To be fair on poor old Cross Fell, we had a recent meet there, in May 2019, with twelve participants run by Bill Morrison, my log called it a “long and satisfying day”.

This all means we can base our walking activity around an annual meets programme; and those walking meets have been a fertile ground for welcoming new members to our Club. And most if not all active members take part at some stage in a year in these meets.

The programme has over these 20 years changed a bit to reflect changes in the Club more generally. For one thing, we’ve become a bit bigger; at the start of the period we hovered around the 100 member mark whereas at the end its been around the 120, a healthy growth at a time when continuing social change has meant some clubs in the mountain world and the sports and leisure scene more broadly, have struggled for members as people are able to access a wider range and variety of activities than in the past.

Looking back to the meets programme of calendar 2001 there were I reckon 39 meets; that compares to 45 for 2019. So more meets, and I feel as varied; I reckon in aggregate we are as, or are more active, as we have ever been, though activity patterns have changed.

The walking meets broadly divide into four types – day trips, walks on Hut weekends, on weekends away elsewhere, and then longer trips perhaps to Scotland or abroad. Some of the last we’ll leave to much later sections, but here’s a few vignettes of the last twenty years...beginning in this section with day trips.

Probably the working limit for a day trip is a two hour each way drive. Close to the northern extreme is the Howgill Fells, well up the M6. We (Ray Baines, Daves Chadwick and Edwards and me) were last there on a damp misty day in August 2018, and navigation was a challenge.

That at least was not a problem so it seems back in May 2002, from Milly Wright’s account in “The Gwydyr 19” magazine which gives a good idea of the character of these hills: she and I, Lin Jensen, and Mike and Marilyn

McEneaney were there....

“Starting up the path we all agreed it was a lovely path...we turned a bend and Dave said ‘we need to go this way now’, pointing at a steeply rising hillside full of rough stuff. I rather weakly uttered that ‘us girls like paths you know...’ I think we were all quite proud of our fast ascent and we soon hit the first summit, splashing through wet rocks to touch the magic trig point.

I spied what looked like a moderately good path...at which point Dave with his usual deflating realism said ‘we need to make for those lakes down there’. It was very much a pointy sort of navigational technique and the next point [on] took us back up to the top again, Marilyn stating with decisive accuracy – ‘it’s like a bloody roller coaster!’

...We got back to the cars and enjoyed the bliss of putting on dry clothes when it was cautiously suggested that perhaps we should go into the Cross Keys Temperance Hotel for afternoon tea...”

Well, for many of us maybe pints are more usual post hill drinks, and a popular venue after day walks recently has been the Bridge Inn at Pont Blyddyn, sometimes after a trip to the Clwyds which is near the other end of the distance spectrum.

We often do the Clwyds in the winter and it’s been the scene of some of our biggest turnouts. One time I can visualise us all – nearly thirty of us - in Coed Nercwys hunkered down to eat lunch in heavy driving snow. Lindsey Fooks’ article in the January 2015 Newsletter talks of a kinder circuit in December 2014: Sixteen people

“...Enjoyed nearly ten miles and 2,500 feet of ascent...tackling Pen y Cloddiau first, the expansive views across the Vale of Clwyd were much admired as we ambled across the ridge. The walk took in some of both Offa’s Dyke Way and the Clwydian Way as we hacked up to Moel y Parc. A solitary crow seemed to be following us at times until we reached the sting in the tail (as well as glorious challenge) of Moel Arthur which we left behind just as the light was beginning to change. Overall the weather was kind to us, giving a dry, bright day with the mildest of winds.”

For me the best Clwyds walk I’ve done was with the Club. In March 2002 Paul Jensen organised a full crossing of the range, from Moel y Parc south over all the summits to Moel y Plas and down to the roadway near the transmitter mast. We placed cars to facilitate the walk, and started from Pandy Cottage on the Denbigh road at 9.15, finishing just short of nine hours later, on a largely sunny day. Huge rainbows followed showers up the Vale of Clwyd, and in the evening golden light silhouetted the Arans, Berwyn and Arenigs. Fourteen people did the walk; Lin Jensen has reminded me of a repeat I missed two years later; between the two the mileage roughs out to 16.5 miles and somewhere around 4,200 feet (pre GPS folks!)

Probably because we use the Hut so much to access Snowdonia, most of the other Welsh day trips at least as far as weekends are concerned, have as in the past tended to focus on the areas to the south and east of the National Park. The Berwyns have been a regular venue; the Arans are just about in range, and despite the limited parking we’ve had a number of trips over the years to Arenig Fawr. As places have become familiar we’ve sought new venues and I’ve taken people up obscurities such as Carnedd y

Filiast and Foel Goch near Bala.



Kinder Scout downfall

Our next nearest venue is the Peak District, and the wide area of wild hills and moors in the South Pennines that lead up to the edge of the Yorkshire Dales.

For most of these years, Mark and Laura Barley, who live near Altrincham, have run day trips to this area. It’s generally lower in height and this fits well with their practice in running these trips in the colder months of the year. To me, these walks have an atmosphere of their own as we often finish as the wintry light starts to fade.

A Mark and Laura trip in March 2012 involved fifteen of us doing the western rim of Kinder Scout, past the magnificent downfall (see above) which was blowing back on the wind, on to Kinder Low summit and back down to our start near Hayfield. The trip illustrated another change in the Club, as we had more women than men in the party by a clear margin. Roger Hughes, one of our founding members, was with us and he remarked on that and we realised how things had changed for the better generally in the Club, when compared to the elder days when we were very top (or is it bottom?) heavy with blokes.

The women got further mileage by asserting robustly that every male in the party was either a silver fox (that was me folks!), grey, or bald. Our response was to admire the high proportion of totally natural red heads in the group...

Below are a couple of photos from to the March 2012 Newsletter to illustrate the day: readers can judge for themselves!



So serious question – *are* all the Club grey or bald? The answer's no of course and we have a good number of younger members, but there is no question the general balance of age groups in the Club has changed over the years.

When it was founded, and for a good few years after, I guess the bulk of members were in their 20s and 30s. Now the bulk of us have 4's or 5's in front of us. When this started to happen in the latter years of the 20th century we started to worry a bit about this age profile. It now seems to have stabilised and we are attracting a healthy flow of new people in this changed context. The balance of opinion is that the shift has been about social change. Younger people being more affluent than in the past – though I guess they don't always feel that is so – and having the opportunity to try out a lot of activities that weren't there once, without having the need to do so communally. And so often taking a bit more time in the past to maybe benefit from, and choose, what we offer.

The more even balance between men and women has also been reflected in the make up of the people who give up their time to manage the Club's committee business. Prior to 2000 we'd had a female Chair, a year of the Hut being looked after by a female Warden, and a number of female Club Secretaries and Committee Members. Since then, female members of the Committee have included two Hut Wardens: Fiona Langton who's in that role now, and Margaret Blakeborough who served for several impactful years. Similarly Jane Webster has just stood down after five years as our first female Treasurer. Heather Jones was our first female House Secretary, and Nicky Hickin has recently taken on that role.

Before we start getting too PC, the records shows that there've been a few special "girlie trips" organised by our female members in this time and that's great: it allows anonymous magazine writers to say things like:

"The male members of the Gwydyr will be glad to hear that the overpowering aroma of Lavender and Chanel has disappeared from the Chapel and it is once more a bastion of masculinity"!

Writing about the Kinder trip mentioned already, Allan McDonald commented on Mark Barley in particular that "he manages to pull a good walk out of the bag". Well I reckon Allan really meant to gush rather more about the

great variety of these day trips.

Mark and Laura have taken us to places most of us I guess would never have gone for ourselves – for example to Darwen in Lancashire which has great golden moorland and beautiful woods and streams; and to the surprisingly rural Werneth Low, which I reckon is the only hill walk I've done that's squarely in the Manchester A-Z.

The variety has also come from the transport we've used. In the Apr/May 2013 Newsletter Mark describes one of his meets in March 2013:

“Eight of us met up in the car park at Chinley station. The plan was to catch the train to Edale and then walk back to Chinley via Jacobs ladder and the outskirts of Hayfield (including a pub stop). Participants included myself, Dave Gray, Dave Antrobus, Dave Chadwick, Mike McEneaney, John Crosby, Chris Harris and his brother Roger. It was wet in Edale and foggy ascending to the trig point at Kinder Low but the weather gradually improved- particularly when we dropped off the Kinder plateau.

After a very pleasant stop at the Sportsman in Hayfield we crossed the main road and followed a well defined track along a scenic ridge back to Chinley passing extensive quarry workings...a very pleasant walk of about 11 miles with 3000 ft of ascent.”

The ridge was the unforgettably named Chinley Churn, and we just got down in daylight! Having been shown the way I was able to use this as the basis for starting a two day trek across the Peak District.



Walking with Mark Barley – setting off from Lyme Park (L to R) Lindsey Fooks, Dave Antrobus, Fiona Langton, Allan McDonald, Helen Bartlam, Mark Barley, Reg Cromer, Davide Avison-Afonso

January 2015.

We had twelve people on the trip and had a bright sunny day. What though was great for me was that this is an area I thought I knew well, but Brenda's route was both new and much more interesting and attractive than the one I'd plodded up for years. Not least because of the introduction of a café doing huge bacon butties. So I was able to take other friends who are a bit “café society” on this walk much to their delight!

The other geographic extreme of our day trip venues is the Midlands, in particular Shropshire. We've had a number of meets based on the huge National Trust car park at Carding Mill Valley in Church Stretton, or at the opposite end of the “chintz spectrum”, foregathered at “The Bog” car park to do the Stiperstones Ridge. From Church Stretton we've gone to both sides of the valley, the Long Mynd to the west, Caer Caradoc to the east. When Pete Mann lived in Birmingham he ran a number of these meets and was adept at finding new routes; I had my first ascent of The Lawley with Pete.

So far, we've focused on day trips at weekends. However, in recent years we have done more.

And finally, the company and conversation – Mark and Laura on science, and on one occasion the shared delight in some of their Chinese university colleagues seeing – and photographing – the British hills and our farms and cottages for the very first time.

A welcome feature in recent years has been newer members coming forward and running successful trips comparatively early on in their time in the Club. It's something we can never have enough of as we want a mix of new ideas along with old favourites in our programme.

We've already mentioned Bill's Cross Fell trip, but another instance of this that sticks in my mind was Brenda Turnbull's day walk on Blackstone Edge from Hollingsworth Lake in

Marilyn McEneaney started “Tuesday Trekking” at a time when she was working part time and both John Huxley and Les Fowles had taken early retirement. Ross McGraw was another regular. Their walks were primarily on the Wirral or the Clwyds, and what was different was that Marilyn publicised them and opened them up to others so they were more than just “private enterprise” trips.

So this trend to have a programme of mid week walks reflected our changed age profile, as more members were retired or early retired and could take a regular part to sustain this extra activity. Working members of course join in too when they can escape!

In February 2008 Mike McEneaney started off a new programme of Thursday walks, when Helen Brady, Dave Chadwick, John Crosby, Bryan and Mike Gilbert, Sue Taylor, Steve Walker and Milly Wright joined Mike to form the initial party, on a demanding day: the ridge of Aran Benllyn and Aran Fawddwy from Llanuwchllyn. My own winter goes at this one have often toyed with the daylight! Mike ran this walk again as a 10 year anniversary trip in April 2018.

He’s done these walks on a roughly monthly basis pretty much ever since. There have been many fine big hill days – for example the 2016 programme included Plynlimon, the Moelwyns, Yr Elen and the Nantlle ridge.

But not all have been in the big hills. One I especially enjoyed was in August 2010 when Mike took 16 of us across the Wirral, coast to coast, on a lovely sunny day. It was an intriguing route, from Eastham Ferry to Parkgate via the



Wirral walk—taking a break at the Harp in Ness



On the summit of Moel Eilio for a Thursday walk

Mersey, Dibbinsdale, Raby Mere, Willaston and the Wirral Way Country Park. We’re lucky to be Wirral based and have done some good day walks here over the years.

In 2019, the Thursday walks had a particular focus around section walking the North Wales Castles Trail. The sections have included the relatively obscure: Rhosesmor to Loggerheads (via the Norman Motte and Bailey at Mold), to the more obvious: Penrhyn Castle to Beaumaris. The latter memorably “sold” by Mike as “The walk is a mixture of hard paths & bog.” Mmmm, challenging I thought! Judy Hughes later said

“It was raining all the time and it was a shame to miss the estuary views – but I really enjoyed the day”

While we’re talking rain, day trips are a successful and popular format but one challenge is turning the vessel round when the weather – or more to the point the forecast - goes awry. It can be hard to cancel, as I found out to my cost when I’d planned a trip back in February 2011 and the forecast turned to solid double rain drops, orange warnings and so on... I made a series of increasingly pleading phone calls around the people coming but no, everyone was fine to go ahead. As planned. Our venue - Bleaklow, where else? From Glossop.

After about 15 minutes from the cars the heavens opened, on we plodded. Mark Barley alone had the sense to turn round, the remaining twelve of us went up Doctor’s Gate and on to Bleaklow, and on the return ended up cringing to have a bite to eat in Devil’s Dyke, starting to get *very* cold indeed. On the way down Doctor’s Gate the side streams were thigh deep in places, but in the end we made it. In the pub late that afternoon, every time one of us sat on the

inglenook seats right by the fire, it raised enough steam to drive the Flying Scotsman. A bad call, I should have asserted myself and cancelled!

Weekends of various types admit of easier flexibility in this regard at least, and it's to those that we'll turn in the next sections.

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