

SECTION 2:

“Bedrock” II: Weekend Walking Meets—Camping



OK then, so how does walking on a GMC weekend meet work? Well, generally speaking while there are ideas aplenty there is no pre-set plan. Given we often don't know who'll be there, we never have a really accurate weather forecast far enough in advance, and usually don't know what our energy levels will be like tomorrow morning, why would we have one? After all, some wise guy said a plan is just a set of ideas that haven't fallen apart yet...

Chris Harris put what we do instead pretty well, when writing in the Oct/Nov 2012 Newsletter about the Chairman's Luxury Meet at Stanley Ghyll in Eskdale that October :

“Who did what rather depended on what time you got up. Mostly a case of ‘which way are you going?’ – “Oh, I'll come with you.”

So either the evening before the first day, or like Chris says on the morning itself – or both – there'll be informal discussions as to what we want to do. As members get to know each other, we get to know each other's walking style and preferences.

What's great therefore is that everyone can usually find something at or close to their own level to do. So people generally don't feel pushed into things that are above their fitness levels or what they feel comfortable doing. Sometimes the person proposing a plan will really want to do it and stick to that, as originally envisaged, but equally will often adapt to bring more people into the group.

Occasionally we'll all do the same thing, but more often will split into smaller groups. So on the Eskdale trip, of the people who walked on the Saturday seven did Scafell via Burnmoor, three Harter Fell, two went along the River Esk to Stanley Force and three – Heather Bliss, Janet Coates and Milly Wright, did the classic 12 mile circuit of Burnmoor Tarn and Illgill Head. Janet recalled that:

“We reached Burnmoor Tarn and then started up the ridge towards Illgill Head. Finding a sunny sheltered spot with wonderful views we stopped for lunch and were then likened to cats by a group of passing (male) walkers for finding such a warm and comfortable spot.

On reaching Illgill Head, we had fabulous views of the south western Lakeland mountains and down to Wasdale Head. Then on to Whin Rigg, with its impressive views down the gullies and screes to Wast Water.

We carried on along the grassy ridge to find that our path through the forest was ‘Closed due to timber clearance’. We continued...anyway and luckily the path was walk-able. The lower path through the deciduous woodland, down to the River Mite was especially scenic. So down to the valley and a couple of miles walk back along the road to Stanley House.”

This pattern of organisation has been consistent as far as I can recall right back to my early days in the early '80s. But what has changed over the past 20 years has I feel been a growth in variety, and change in the balance, of the

venues we use as a our weekend bases.

In essence these are camping on organised sites, glamping and yurts, bivvies and wild camping weekends. And then “with roofs on” weekends at our own Hut at Tan y Garth, bunkhouses including Other People’s Huts, Youth Hostels, other self catering places and camping barns. Let’s take a peek at some of what’s gone on in each...taking the camping-ish things first and the rest for the next section. We’ll start with a few memorable camping weekends across this period...

Having as a boy holidayed “Amongst the Brummies” in Barmouth, Cader Idris and the Mawddach is a much loved area for me. In the September 2011 Newsletter Mike Gavin describes his Cader meet of July 2005 which had ten happy campers:

“Most of us arrived at the camp site [at Ty Nant] on the Friday afternoon or evening...and enjoyed the sunshine and spectacular views...We all pitched our tents but Mike Davies had a few problems with his poles, I think the problem was he didn’t have them, but with a little help from his friends he got his tent up eventually...”

On the Saturday the main party did Cader Idris, Cyfrwy summit and Craig Las by the Foxes Path, returning via the Pony Path, and everyone met for in the Gwernan Lake Hotel for

“...a good post hill pint. Eventually we headed back to the tents to dine. Then we lit a fire...enjoying lots of red wine. The fire was not very good at keeping the mossies away and various members took their own patented methods to protect themselves. On the Sunday most of the group did a low level walk along the Mawddach Estuary, starting at Fairbourne and going to Penmaenpool.”

One undoubted change in these years is that despite excellent camping trips, like the one above, our use of camping on formal sites has declined relative to other accommodation, and camping meets have become fewer and further between.

Why? I’m guessing that it’s partly due to social change. First up is our older age profile in the Club; from personal experience I would admit that camping’s less attractive in one’s fifties than in one’s twenties or thirties. Secondly, I think increased affluence makes other types of accommodation more attractive, and on top of that after the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001 many campsites seemed to become relatively more expensive when compared say to bunkhouses and camping barns. For example there’s not much difference between what we charge guests for our hut per capita and local campsite prices for an offering that can be less hill-efficient. In indifferent weather you get more “availability” for getting on the hill when you’re not also working hard just to stay dry or to dry out at base. For some venues– notably the Lakes – driving time seems to have increased and that means later pitches. Finally on some bigger sites there is more hassle and bureaucracy than there was. So there’s kind of a tidal flow running counter to using camp sites.

Acknowledging all that, there have been continuing and repeated success stories especially at popular camp sites where the atmosphere is welcoming and the sun seems to shine.

Not far to the north of Cader are the rugged Rhinogs, and up the Artro Valley is the very pleasant and informal Dinas campsite. Ray Baines organised a weekend here in September 2011. We had showers and sunshine mixed but got out – on the Saturday Ray, myself, Bethan Hines, Neil Metcalfe and Teresa Peddie did a circuit of Llyn Ddu and Gloyw Llyn via the iconic Roman Steps; and on the Sunday Ray, Bethan and I did Y Llethr, highest in the range, from remote Cwm Nantcol, enjoying vast views as the weather cleared. Seven members returned there in September 2014 when we added Rhinog Fawr and Diffwys to our summit tally and Ray and I swam at Harlech.



Helen Bartlam and Carol Boothroyd on the Lleyn

The prospect of more sun and sand attracted people to another friendly site, Penrallt Coastal Campsite on the Lleyn

for a couple of September coastal walking weekends in the 2010s. Again on the coast, possibly the most luxurious camping we had around this time was the series of barbecues Nuala and Chris Dunn did for the Club at their home in Brynecrug near Aberdyfi. Swimming at cemetery beach was always on the menu, and I loved waking up in the early morning to hear the roar of the waves on the sea a couple of miles away. Hill wise the usual suspects were walking and climbing on Cader Idris, on the more remote Tarren Hendre range, or at lower levels on Craig yr Aderyn or round Llyn Barfolg.

Most consistently popular in recent years has been another barbecue/party/coastal walking and climbing event, Kev McEvoy's regular weekends in the summer at The Outdoor Alternative in Rhoscolyn. OK, some of us stay in the bunkhouse but a good number camp too.



Teresa Peddie on Symphony Crack

In the June 2013 Newsletter Allan McDonald writes "The weekend of the 3rd August 2013 was Kevin McEvoy's annual Rhoscolyn meet. We camped at the Outdoor Alternative site which has to be one of the nicest located sites anywhere.

On the Saturday morning we divided into two groups, walkers and climbers and while the walkers disappeared relatively early for the classic circuit of Trearddur Bay, Kevin, Andy [Odger], John [Austin], Phil Donn (& family), Beth and I headed over to Rhoscolyn Head and the delightful Symphony Crack [graded Diff]."

I love Rhoscolyn and must admit I usually do exactly the same every year – on my own most recent visit in July

2018 guess what, I did the Trearddur Bay circuit, with Barbara Richards, Sonja Grigor, Katie Harris, James Bamforth, Nicky Hickin, Claire Domeny, John Simpson, and Chris and Janet Harris. We swam as usual at Silver Bay. What's so good about the GMC is that a good number of these people have joined in recent years well after these trips began!

On the second day of the weekend Holyhead Mountain and South and North Stacks is a popular venue for the walkers. Over the years some of us have gone kayaking and coastering on trips organised by Outdoor Alternative.

Recently glamping and yurts have boomed, and the GMC has joined the trend. An early adopter was Allan McDonald and his daughter Hollie, again at Dinas. In the Apr/May 2013 Newsletter he writes:

"We arrived...with just a bag of clothes and food and were shown to our previously erected bell tent. It was carpeted, had a double bed, futons, cupboards, electricity, wifi and a wood burning stove. What more could a teenager want? A mobile phone signal: which was non-existent!"



Scenes of Yurt Life – Sue Taylor, Vanda and Kev McEvoy, Sonja and John Austen

In April 2018 the Club had a full on yurt trip organised by Sonja Grigor and Barbara Richards, to two yurts on Langdale National Trust campsite. It was great fun, most of us had never been yurting – or indeed yurted - before and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

It beats camping in that one can stand up and knows that the accommodation won't blow away: there's heating and a stove; but getting things dry and trekking to the loo and showers remain, and everyone has to go to bed and get up at much the same time. Even Genghiz Khan, master of the largest terrestrial empire the world has seen, had to trek to the loo! At least it kept his mileage up I guess...

It was fantastic that Sonja and Barbara cooked breakfast

of bacon butties for all of us each day. We had three good hill days, a number of us doing a sunny Cold Pike and

Pike o'Blisco on the Saturday. I got John Austin lost on Harrison Stickle in mist on Friday, and he and I did Grit Fell and Clougha Pike in Bowland on the way home.



John Austen on Clougha Pike

When the weather's good nothing beats wild camping. Bethan Hines and Teresa Peddie did a magic camp in the August of 2011 that for me brings out how good this can be: Teresa writes in the August Newsletter of that year:

“Being typical girls, our minimal camping gear consisted of everything except the kitchen sink and with 2 decanted bottles of cava on board, our rucksacks ended up bigger and heavier than ourselves! We staggered up the steps by the waterfall to reach Llyn Bochlywd shortly before night-fall, only to find that our chosen spot to pitch the tent was

already taken! After clambering around in the heather and berrybil, with darkness drawing in fast, we managed to find a poor second best option on what at first glance looked like a very slight slope and a carpet of berrybil. (We later found out that a slight slope is never slight when you're trying to sleep on it, and berrybil is not very comfortable if you can't flatten it, when Beth ended up spending half the night sliding down and curled up at the bottom of the tent!) It was a beautiful clear crisp night, what an awesome experience sitting in total peace and solitude looking up at the stars, and watching the space station shooting across the sky at 10.30, and the moon rising from behind the Glyders a bit later. Next day, up bright and early, porridge and berrybils for breakfast, and coffee with water from the lake.

We went up Gribin ridge, and scrambled up the ridge edge, with some exposure: to the top of Glyder Fawr, with breathtaking views of the clouds rising up from the valley floor. We topped off our scramble with a scramble over the top of the Castle [of the Winds], down onto Glyder Fach, with a couple of compulsory shots on the Cantilever stone. By this time the mist from the valleys was curling over the tops, so we decided to take the quickest route back down to Bwlch Tryfan down the scree slope at the side of bristly ridge, which was a bit of adventure as the mist closed in. We reached Llyn Bochlywd as the rain began, and had great fun trying to find the tent again in the clouds, one minute we could see it the next it was gone!! We beat a hasty and very wet retreat back down to Ogwen, two sodden but very happy and buzzin' Wild Girls! “



Beth and Teresa setting out



And Teresa in camp

Mmm good timing! Less so a good few years before for a party consisting of Brian Bernard, Paul Jensen, Bill and Dave Kelly, Dave Kelly junior, John Malley, and young Dave's friend Ian. In “The Gwydyr 17” magazine Paul describes the latter parts of a night navigation and high camping trip in February 2000, to Llynau Diwaunydd west of Moel Siabod:

“Saturday midnight: the beginning of the end...Dave Kelly's tent was the first to succumb to the wind that had

risen steadily all evening. By midnight it was howling round the crags above us dropping down to hit our tents... in an attempt to discover their weakness. Dave Kelly packed up alone telling those within earshot he was heading down to the Hut. Twenty or thirty paces convinced him that staying put was a better idea given the serious prospect of being blown off the hill...he was taken in by John.

Sunday 4.30 am: things get much worse...By now most of our tents had suffered damage [and] my tent pole finally snapped. I emerged... fully kitted up for the foul weather. As I stuffed my tent into my rucsac my mountain cap was whipped from my head. I made a futile attempt to grab it and my 40lb rucsac followed the cap. This was the height of the storm and everyone was helping each other to complete packing.

Sunday: some time later...The walk off the hill in complete darkness over slippery peat and mud with the rain lashing down and the winds howling...was an epic. When we arrived back the Hut was quiet and in darkness save for the kitchen light...how to get in without waking anyone? In the kitchen Reg Cromer was up early and writing at a table, I tapped on the window and was told to go away (thanks Reg!) I eventually persuaded him to open the front door and let seven bedraggled souls into the shelter...'At your age Mr Jensen I'd have thought you'd have known better!' was Reg's only comment as he returned to his writings...and as Huxley said 'It pays to check the weather forecast **before** you set off!'"

Looking back again to the earlier part of our period, particularly interesting and innovative were the "Bombay Bivvy" in May 2004 and "Beijing Bivvy". These were organised by Tony Lamberton and the menu for the first was poppadums, chutney and salads; vegetable and meat samosas; chicken tikka and salad; beef jalfrezi, rice and naan. The venue? High on Tryfan after a climb of Gashed Crag (V Diff) on the east face. The team? Tony plus Chris Costello, Paul Jensen, Richard Kinsman and Allan McDonald. As far as I can find out, the Beijing event took place on the Moelwyns the next year.

The two trips above contrast at least in catering terms with one in August 2017 that involved Ray Baines, Ronnie Davies, and me on another lakeside wild camping weekend. We'd backpacked from Llandrillo over Cader and Craig Berwyn and Moel Sych, and descended south of the ridge to camp by the outlet of Llyn Lluncaws, which in the past was one of John Huxley's favourite pitches, and to which he'd taken me in my twenties. It was a good achievement especially for Ray on his first backpack.

At 57 I'd decided I don't like hard work and it was time for new weight saving tactics to be tried. Did the pioneers lug heavy stoves and fuel around just to have hot food? No! They lived on champagne, brandy, jellied pheasant and pate de fois gras, and given it was summer and a good forecast so would I. So smoked salmon, cold chicken and potato salad, welsh cakes, choccie and whisky was my menu for us tea.

As the evening fell and a cool breeze sprang up Ronnie and Ray retired to bed and were soon snoring. I had a wonderful solo hour with some Scotch, watching a crescent moon set slowly over the hills sending a constant play of white light over the rippling and silent lake.

Next morning after a starry night the cliffs were suffused with pink as we woke and packed off to do the re-ascent to Moel Sych in the cool of the day. We had clear views north over Snowdonia, but the whole of mid Wales and the Marches lay to our south in a sea of mist, with the hills rising black above: Plynlimon, the Wrekin, what we guessed to be the Clent Hills beyond that, and the line of the Pennines. We descended to Milltir Cerrig and Cwm Pennant and rounded the weekend off with a fry up in Corwen. On that highest of notes we'll leave wild camping for now.

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