

CUMBRIAN MEMORIES

For a club based on the Wirral there are many alternatives to Snowdonia. In addition to Mid-Wales and the whole of the Pennines, the Lake District is well within reach. The Club's physical base, however, is obviously North Wales and that, plus its proximity, works slightly against other areas. On the other hand it's nice to have a change from North Wales, superb though that area is, so we normally have three or four Lakes outings in each annual Meets Programme. Although these are mainly camping meets there have been some excellent self-catering weekends over the years.

The first ever Lakes meet was in July, 1967, to Patterdale. The transport arrangements were: hitching (John Huxley), scooter (Roger Hughes), and car (Mike McEneaney & "Squire" Patton). They had an excellent weekend on Helvellyn and High Street, the forerunner of many Lakes meets over the years.

Another of the early meets was to Dub's Hut above the Honister Pass: this was owned by the Keswick M.C. and was the definition of "hovel" brought to life. It had a strip-feed paraffin heater which Bruce Jensen and John Huxley spent a whole day shivering by (the rest were on the hill) only for some smart Alec to come in and pull a lever that they had failed to notice. The heater then worked excellently. The rubbish was thrown down an unprotected 100-foot deep shaft. Walking about at night was not wise. It was a great base for Gable etc. but a little too far from the pub to be a viable GMC option on a regular basis.

Against the stupendous backdrop of the finest valley head in England, on the second Saturday of October each year, there takes place one of those very Cumbrian shows. There are a number of these, but none has the setting of the Wasdale Show, held beneath England's highest mountain, ringed by Scafell and Scafell Pike, Great Gable, Kirk Fell and the peaks around Mosedale. Very often, the weather is balmy this time of year and the crowds have a memorable day with domestic and agricultural events in the morning and sporting ones in the afternoon. The Club's first attendance at this event was in 1970:

"The trouble with the Wasdale Show was drink. It took us a long time to realise this, but the problem was definitely drink alright. It was all the fault of the Tug-of-War competition which took place later on in the day, along with fell-running, terrier-racing and other sporting events. When the pub closed the beer tent, a large marquee, stayed open all afternoon with disastrous results".

The early GMC attendance at Wasdale Shows was such that the Club could supply, for the tug-of-war event, an "A" team, a "B" team and a Ladies team. The idea was to devote Saturday to the Show and the necessary drinking and then have a healing day on the hill on the Sunday. To a large extent, this formula was applied but the condition of certain members on the Sunday morning was often dire. The rock-climbers used to delight in taking some of the worst afflicted up a route on Kern Knotts, where they would vow never to drink (to excess) again. The walkers would struggle round the peaks of Mosedale or Gable or the Scafells so that, come Sunday evening, most of the party could claim to be spiritually and morally uplifted, the drunken deeds of the previous day safely behind them and the journey home contemplated with some confidence.

Fred Heywood, writing in the January 1974 magazine (no.2), captured the atmosphere well:



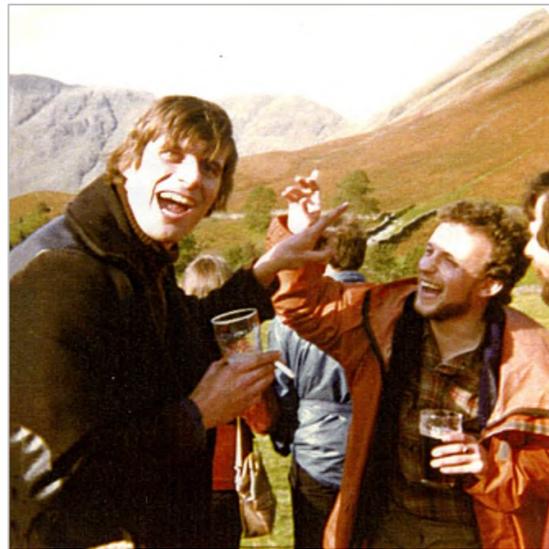
1980: On the way up Blencathra



On the summit, with Elaine Green, Lynette Thornton, Mike McEneaney, Steve Potts and Christina Callaghan (now Potts)



The Gilberts, Don MacIntosh and Mike Davies at the Wasdale Show



Brian Dibben and Simon Glover at the Wasdale Show

"This account may not be accurate" he wrote "but few of the people present would be in a position to dispute it!" and then "Two-thirty: Chris (Hall) is fighting his way to the bar for the third time. Seven pints and Les is definitely slowing down, convinced he has the D.T.'s. Ken's looking better. Chris is looking the same as ever but his speech is going. At three o'clock we leave the bar to move over to the show."

One of the more colourful results of the all-day drinking occurred in the early eighties when Brian Dibben came on the scene. He had left everyone else far behind with a lethal mixture of Theakstons Best Bitter and Newcastle Brown and, come the time for us to compete in the Tug-of-War, was well past his best:

"We took the strain against some tough-looking Cumbrian lads, only to hear the referee shout in his wonderful Cumbrian voice ' Eh up! What's wrong wi' t' anchor.man? We looked back: our anchor man, one Brian Dibben, was lying on the floor in a drunken stupor. We made a rather rapid exit from the event that year".

One year, the lady members distinguished themselves by getting into the final of the Tug-of-War against the wives of the Young Farmers. A snapping rope provided additional entertainment leading to a spectacular defeat and descent into the mud. The team included Gill Beamer, Janet Ford, Nuala Mulholland, Christine Davies, Jenny Bower and other female stars. These days, we normally go on the hill before the show and maybe pick up the last two hours. It's more of a walking weekend now, but if the weather's kind there is no place quite like it.

We have camped at Wasdale in the summer as well; one such trip began in Wasdale and moved on to Langdale, where John Huxley joined it at the end of the week, having had to go home from Wasdale:

"On the first weekend Nuala Mulholland's new boyfriend was due to join us. Nuala seemed worried: 'I hope you'll like him. He's a bit of an oddball.' We reassured her: 'You're pretty peculiar yourself, Nu!' John Conroy duly arrived. He proved to be a gentle, easygoing, well, oddball, yes. He therefore fitted in extremely well".

On the day of the show one year Mal Lamb, John Huxley, Christine Davies, Jenny Bower and Nuala Mulholland were descending after a good day on Great Gable, Kirk Fell, and Pillar. Earlier in the day Pete Chreseson had shouted across to them on Kirk Fell from Gable, where he was part way through some twenty-mile epic. Pete had an incredibly loud voice and it was as though he was just yards away. The group continued the descent from Pillar, talking continuously and looking forward to a drink in the Wasdale Head bar:

"We suddenly came out of the mist above a sea of conifers. Conifers in Wasdale? It seemed we had talked our way off the route and this was in fact, Ennerdale. An arduous ascent, right at the wrong end of the day, put us back on course. Down at the bar, Pete Chreseson assumed smug bastard mode, saying how obvious the route was and how could we possibly have missed it. We took it for a while then firmly changed the subject".

In Summer 1983 a group was camping at Buttermere:

" Feeling superfit after completing Offa's Dyke with Don Macintosh, I led the gallant party of Dave Gray, Mike Davies and Mike McEneaney from Buttermere up to Scarth Gap. It was a fabulous summer's day and we were headed for Wasdale Head and then Gable. We were soon heading down into Ennerdale, which always reminds me of Scotland. Then over Black Sail and

down to Wasdale, where it was an ideal day to sit outside and have a pint or two. Three and a half pints later, we floated up to Sty Head. It was on the steep ascent to Gable that I began to feel rather rough and lagged miles behind the rest. At least a pint and a half too much, I told myself. Anyway, the body is a wonderful thing and I recovered on the way down to Green Gable. Brandreth, Grey Knotts, and Fleetwith Pike completed an excellent day".

August 1989 saw another group in Buttermere. Pete Townson, our tame GP, was there, and he had given a lift to Diane Blackburn, a potential new member introduced by Ian Gearing, who had recently come along to the Club. The Saturday was quite a decent day and we did Robinson, Dale Head and Fleetwith Pike, finishing off with a stroll along the north shore of Buttermere:

"Di asked if anyone else was joining the meet that night. Well, we said, there was one person arriving who she would certainly not forget in a hurry and this was Peter Chreseson or Cress as he was invariably known.

Along the lake we more or less did our usual character assassination of Cress while grudgingly admitting his few good points. (Two weeks earlier Di and I had been dining in the Sportsman's on the Denbigh Moors after a good day on the Snowdon Horseshoe and the somewhat frank conversation had been all about Di's maternal ambitions; 'of course' she said, 'I don't really need a man, a sperm bank will do.' That conversation, and the events of this weekend were amusing to recall at Cress and Di's wedding the following February; resulting in Cress's other nickname of 'Spermbank').

Like the Flying Horseshoe, the Wasdale Head also at one time kept some rather lax drinking hours. It was perfectly possible to arrive at nine-thirty on a Friday night and drink six bottles of Newcastle Brown before staggering the short distance to the very handily placed bunkhouse (not now in the same position). This made a nice winter alternative to camping. On one notorious occasion, Mr Fowles began to rip up the lino at the top of the stairs in the mistaken belief that, if it was black and yellow (which it was), it must be his sleeping bag.

As I say, this was a winter thing and very much subject to the weather. Some of the walks, therefore, were low-levelish and included the crossing to the Burnmoor Inn via the Tarn. At the time it was run by an Austrian lady and her English husband:

"We arrived there one time at about two in the afternoon. Josie, the flamboyant Austrian, was behind the bar. There were two ageing locals in cloth caps. Josie was in the habit of going topless. She did this quite suddenly while I was having a fascinating conversation with her quiet, embarrassed husband, who was steeped in the history of Lakeland mountaineering. It was impossible to concentrate on what he was saying with the hubbub going on in the background. The two old guys were ecstatic and the rest of the group were in hysterics. It was a difficult moment".

One Easter a number of members decided to do a Lake District backpack:

"We called it the Heads of the Dales backpack and I'll tell you how bad the weather was: Bill Sutherland used a four letter word, that's how bad it was. To this day it's the only time I've ever heard him swear. It was the wettest Easter for years, four days of unrelenting rain. We started from Langdale and took the Stake Pass over to Borrowdale and camped. The bar was open-sided, by a stream and caused Bill to swear. It was so cold I suggested we headed back to the tents for a nice hot brew. Yes folks, Bill S. swore and I left a pub before closing time, that's how extreme conditions had become".



Esk Hause Langdale "Lakes" 1980
Anne Harden, Bryan Gilbert, John Huxley and Mike Gilbert



Stickle Tarn Langdale 1980
John Huxley and Paula Bishop



John Huxley – Esk Hause Langdale 1980



Bryan Gilbert and Anne Harnden – Esk Hause Langdale 1980

The next day they headed over Sty Head to Wasdale:

"Bill and Tony insisted on vanishing into the mist every now and then, apparently to climb mountains, the idiots. Me, Don and the rest just ploughed on to the next resting place in the pouring rain. At least one could do some serious drinking in Wasdale".

In the morning the weather was unchanged:

"We dragged ourselves over to Eskdale via the Burnmoor Tarn for some more good quality drinking. The final day was back to Langdale via Hard Knott Wrynose and Blea Tarn in the lashing rain. From time to time Bill and Tony would vanish on some crazy errand. I seem to remember Don and I stayed on in Langdale to dry out and complete the drinking circuit".

The Club has camped at Threlkeld a number of times, at the pleasant little site south of the A66. On one occasion, in 1987, on a fabulously sunny day:

"We did the Blencathra and Skiddaw double and walked back along the old Penrith to Keswick railway track. As we walked, Mal (Lamb) led the party in a number of hearty renditions of old sixties numbers, a speciality of his, and this gave a very pleasant end to another memorable day"

On another Threlkeld meet, in August 1997, Richard Kinsman and Pete Mann had some good climbing on Shepherd's Crag in Borrowdale, doing Brown Slab Direct (V.Diff) and Eve (VS).

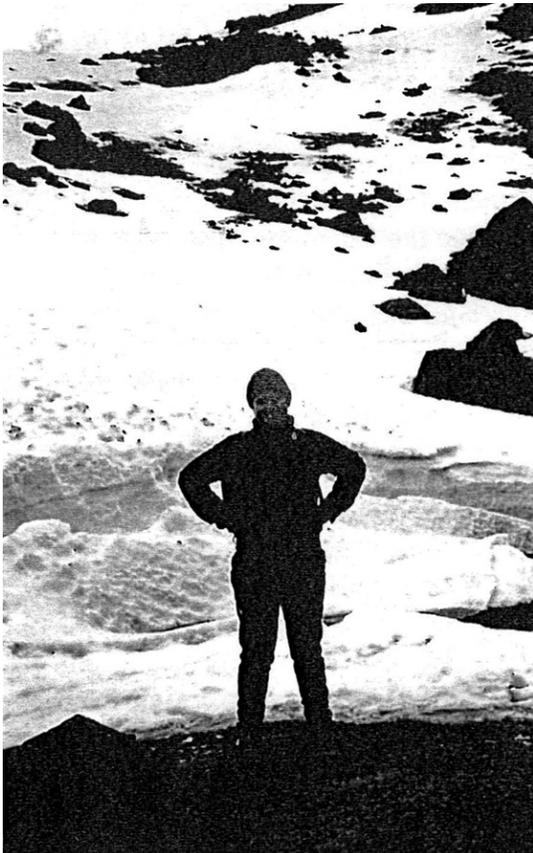
Langdale has always been popular with the Club, the bigger days being the Langdale Horseshoe or the Scafells via Angle Tarn. In good weather there is something special about coming down the Band off Bowfell and seeing Langdale laid out below. There is also the choice of the Old Dungeon Ghyll or the Stickle Barn (the New D.G.) A group almost managed to get snowed in there one year but, alas, were just able to get out of the valley. The Club has also used campsites in Borrowdale and at Braithwaite (Keswick).

There have been some excellent non-camping meets at Hartsop Fold (Brotherswater), which was timber chalets sleeping six and grouped round a clearing; Patterdale Hall Estate in Patterdale itself which was a mixture of apartments and cottages; Salkeld Hall, a lovely converted medieval coaching house outside Penrith, divided into different-sized self-catering apartments; the Blencathra Centre above Threlkeld; and of course good old Fisherground farm in Eskdale with its wonderful wet-weather alternative of riding the railway to the Ratty Arms. On the other hand camping barns have also been used, most recently for Bryn Roberts' 40th at Borrowdale, where facilities are much more basic but, of course, very cheap. As ever, you get what you pay for.

The Club has camped in Dunnerdale (at Turner Hall Farm) and enjoyed the excellent facilities of the Newfield Inn on a number of occasions. In the last few years, though, Derek Burrows has gone one better and arranged an annual, early winter self-catering meet in accommodation owned by and right next door to the Inn. The beer supply is topped up to cope with the extra ten to twelve drinkers on the three nights of Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. On the 1998 meet there were ascents of Dow Crag and Coniston Old Man and, in the pub on the middle night, an excellent quiz with questions set by members of the group.



Vicky Melbourne, Jenny Bower, Christine Davies, Mal Lamb and Dave Gray
On the summit of Skiddaw



Derek Burrows at Foxes Tarn, East of the
Scafells, on Mark Barley's 40th Birthday week



Bryn Roberts, Christine Rowlands, Helen
Brady, Helen Beddows and Andy Williams
On Coniston Old Man

In Magazine no.11 Nuala Mulholland writes about a character created by Dave Gray called Hartley Firmbum. Hartley is tall, Ron Hilled, pert bottomed and with a certain rugged quality "defined like the rock climbed". Nuala pursues the real Hartley every waking hour and one day, while Dave was training for his Cuillin Munroes:

"Mr Gray had decided to learn to climb and with this goal in mind arrived in Eskdale; harnessed and helmeted, he proceeded to Wallowbarrow Crag, llamas and peacocks below, and climbed with Andy and Helen in perfect form, a vision of feline agility, masculine strength and ruggedness. He finished on the rock, threw off the rope, and strode purposefully down to the base of the crag. As I sat there watching, mouth open, heart racing, I realised that the character he had created, he had become. Dave Gray is Hartley Firmbum - my hero!"

Weekend trips to the Lakes are the norm but there have been some good daytrips as well, the Kentmere Round for example and, memorably, to the Coniston Old Man group one snowy day. Some members have done the Cumbrian Way (Sue & Neil) and of course the Coast-to-Coasters pass through Ennerdale, Borrowdale, Grasmere, Patterdale and Haweswater. Bill Sutherland has also done the mighty Bob Graham Round in a time of 23 hours and 25 minutes.

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