



The Gwydyr Mountain Club Newsletter

April 2021

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Harris

Upcoming stuff.

You may (or not) have noticed that I have put two walks in the Llangollen area on the meets list. The first on July 10th is listed as "Cyrn y Brain/World's End" and the second on 27th November as "Llantysilio Hills". If you complete these two then you will have walked about half of the Llangollen Round so it seems logical that next year I will add in Carrog to Llangollen and Llangollen to World's End to complete the round.

While regulations prevent staying away from home, we are hoping to increase the number of day walks, mostly Thursdays and Saturdays. Information will be emailed and put on the club website.

Articles this month:

There are not many mountains (none) featured in this month's Newsletter but hopefully that will soon be rectified as I'm sure you are all waiting for the day when we will be able to head for the hills.

- 1) **The Wirral Four Tumps – by Bike and Foot. (by Richard Smith)**
- 2) **Aberdeenshire's coasts and castles - by Dave Gray.** Dave explored this area 5 years ago and it may be of interest to those wishing to find a quieter spot in the UK following lockdown.
- 3) **High Cup Nick - by Chris Harris**
- 4) **Mal Bonner - by Pete Smedley**

1) The Wirral Four Tumps – by Bike and Foot. Richard Smith

Tumps were something that we had never heard of until a GMC trip to the Cairngorms in 2019 when, on a low level walk, a wizened old chap emerged from the heather and told us that he had just done a tump. Charming, we thought!

He then went on to explain that TUMP stands for Thirty Upward Metres of Prominence, in other words all hills that have a drop of 30m in all directions. He said that there are over 17,000 in the UK and the Hill Bagging Website lists them all by county, if you are interested! Apparently no one has completed them all and he was in the top twenty of those foolish enough to attempt them.

We discovered that there are only four on the Wirral – Poll Hill, Caldys Hill, Gorse Hill and Prenton Hill.

During the long lockdown winter of 2020/21, when we were allowed out just once a day and advised to stay "local", it occurred to me that it would make a nice bike ride to take in these four TUMPS and I planned a circular route starting and finishing in Heswall – a comfortable 36 miles taking less than three hours on the bike. Discussing it with Glenn, we also thought that it might be feasible to walk it, with a few shortcuts to reduce the distance slightly.

For Easter weekend, the government kindly allowed us to gather outside in small groups and so we arranged to do the bike ride on Good Friday and the walk on Easter Sunday.



Starting the ride at Poll Hill

Eight cyclists set out and ascended Poll Hill in Heswall, at 108m the highest point on the Wirral peninsular. From there through Irby to Caldy and up Kings Drive, which is a mini Alpine-style climb with a hairpin bend halfway up, to the second top at 77m. Free-wheeling down into West Kirby and along to Hoylake, there was then a flat stretch along the sea front to New Brighton, where a right turn took us up the steep ramp of Portland Street and the sound of granny rings being engaged. Gorse Hill has a delightful little Millennium Park at the highest point, which is maintained by volunteers and well worth a visit.



Banana stop at Gorse Hill, New Brighton

From there, we descended to the Promenade from New Brighton to Seacombe and on to Birkenhead, climbing Argyle Street, descending past the hallowed ground of Prenton Park and on to the last TUMP of Prenton Hill. Returning to Heswall, we went up School Hill, which is one of the toughest short hills on the Wirral, gradually steepening as you approach the top, making you wish you had never attempted it. Glenn had the misfortune to puncture halfway up and less than a mile from the end of the ride.

Well done to Kay, Helen, Glenn, Steve, Paul, Adele and Adrian for completing the ride.

Having competed stage one, the scene was set for the long walk two days later.

Roger Hughes devised a cunning plan involving the use of several trains to shorten the distance from 28 to 12 miles. This involved catching a train from West Kirby to New Brighton and another from New Brighton to Bidston and then on to Heswall Hills.



Early start at Prenton Hill

Ten of us met at 7.30am outside Jane's house, which is conveniently situated near the top of Prenton Hill. So we had ticked off one TUMP by 7.35. Buoyed by this early success, we proceeded across the golf course and fields to Storeton and Thingwall, arriving at Poll Hill by 09.30.

From there, we took the Oldfield Farm footpath, passing one of the best views on the Wirral overlooking the Dee Estuary and onwards to Thurstaston. We passed over Thurstaston Hill, a bonus hill (which does not count as a TUMP as it is actually a bump on the side of Poll Hill), and then on to Caldy, passing through head-high gorse bushes towards the Column, for a lunch stop.



Great views over the Dee from Thurstaston Hill

At West Kirby, Roger and Dave boarded the train for the sensible option (some would call it cheating) while the masochists took on the eight mile march along the beach from Red Rocks to New Brighton. Due to the Covid rules and it being a bank holiday weekend, there was a distinct absence of refreshment opportunities, cafes etc. But rumours circulated of a mobile chip shop near Leasowe lighthouse and the, by now, flagging group of eight speeded up their walking with the mouth-watering prospect of a polystyrene tray of chips, salt and vinegar washed down with coffee in a plastic cup. To our dismay, there was a long queue of people waiting for this culinary delight and we decided to carry on in a somewhat depressed state. Glenn assured us that there was bound to be somewhere in New Brighton to get food and drink.



Plenty of room for social distance walking!

We approached New Brighton and swiftly knocked off the final TUMP, before heading down in urgent pursuit of food. We walked past the rows of cafes, pubs and shops (all closed) and the temptation to get on the train and call it a day grew ever stronger. Then Glenn spotted the only open shop in town – a Bargain Booze! We descended like bees round a honeypot and bought up all the chocolate and emptied the coffee machine. On a high with all that caffeine and e-numbers, we marched along the prom to Seacombe and on to the last leg.

The only detraction from this walk is that it requires passage through what some would describe as the “a**e end of Birkenhead” – the industrial area that runs from Four Bridges towards the edge of Birkenhead Park. At this point we were thinking we should have taken the train get-out clause, but we soldiered on before arriving back at our start point and comparing our Strava data:

28.5 miles and 1100 ft of ascent in 11 hours and 52 minutes.

Well done to Glenn, Helen, Kay, Jane, Lee, Zahida, David, Roger and Dave for taking it on.

Overall, a grand day out to emerge from lockdown and a great way to see the Wirral.

Richard Smith

2) Aberdeenshire’s coasts and castles (by Dave Gray)

In August 2016 I thought I’d try to visit somewhere in Scotland that was (a) totally new to me and (b) likely to be out of the flightpath of the midgies. I also wanted somewhere that was not a mega drive, which made me rule out venues north of the Great Glen.

I’ve a good guidebook (if a little dated – see below) by Andrew Dempster called ‘100 Classic Coastal Walks in Scotland’ and the articles in this encouraged me to try the Aberdeenshire area. They described a coastline studded with cliffs and castles giving some fine walking. The reliable old blue independent hostel guide took me to a bunkhouse at Rattray Head, close to Scotland’s most easterly point. Having spent so much time in the west, this certainly was new!

Castle #1 – Dunottar

On the drive up I stopped off just south of Stonehaven to do a short walk of 3 or 4 miles to the area of Dunottar Castle. This is a huge Scottish style castle, with a bloody and unpleasant history from the 12th century onwards, set on a peninsula amongst dramatic cliff and stack scenery. Most of what you can see is 15th or 16th century; Oliver Cromwell is supposed to have vandalised the library trying to find the Scots crown jewels, which had been hidden there but cannily removed prior to his arrival. Stropo Olly.



The path is really easy up to the castle – I went a bit beyond to where it started to deteriorate.

Aberdeenshire isn’t crowded or heavily walked – that’s great, but the penalty to pay is some rough and uncertain coastal pathways, often slippery and overgrown close to large drops.

It also has to be said that coastal Aberdeenshire means just that – the scene immediately inland is a bit like the duller bits of the Sandstone trail i.e. lots of fields. The land is heavily farmed and doesn’t immediately grab one’s attention in terms of interest and wildlife: perhaps I didn’t give it a fair chance and things improve on closer

acquaintance. One good thing though is that the council have made the old Buchan and Formartine railway lines into a pleasant and well maintained long distance path and cycleway; so if you fancy a change you can do some of that, as I did on my last day, the walking is easy and flat! A real highlight of that day was picking masses of wild raspberries growing right beside the path.

At Rattray Head

The bunkhouse (* see end note) was basic but clean and friendly and full of character – and was a unique building and setting. It's a conversion from some 19th century lighthouse keepers' cottages.



The lighthouse itself is visible from your bedroom, and is set on a magnificent beach beyond a huge dune system. On my third day, I walked the length of the beach, six miles there and six miles back, to a grim little non-place called St Combs, named after the patron saint of hairdressers. Aberdeenshire gets you into a zen-like state pretty quickly and I came back from the walk *very* relaxed having been almost totally alone all day on the beach amongst herons and curlews, with seals and gannets massed out to sea.



In fact St Combs is named after a St Columba's church that doesn't exist any more and this area is rich in non-existent places; principally the villages of Rattray and Forvie that were overwhelmed in early modern times by the shifting sand dunes. All that's left of both of them are ruined churches. Sand dunes that fight back – we could do with some of them on the Wirral!

Castle #2 – Slains

My second day's walking was along a spectacular coastline from Slains castle to Longhaven. This is all south of Peterhead, whose prison (nka 'HMP Grampian') seems to have the reputation of being the Scots version of Alcatraz. Without the expense of deadly chilled currents and shark infested waters: possibly sheer remoteness from anywhere else does the job just as well. Certainly the 'rendezvous point' for the 'emergency services' was barely south out of town, suggesting no one gets very far...

This walk starts at another fine ruined castle, mainly built between the 16th and 19th centuries set out on a headland. It's believed to be the inspiration for Castle Dracula in Bram Stoker's original book. When I was at the castle two pipers were playing which made for a moving atmosphere, they seemed very competent players. You can just see their figures in this picture.



Then heading north you go along miles of coast with constant interest in terms of stacks, cliffs and caves, plus a huge collapsed cave called the Bullers of Buchan, or more simply 'the pot'. The path is reasonable if narrow and a mile of road walking at the Bullers allows you to get away without doing a whole out and back.





Natures' fortresses

My other two days focussed on nature as much as scenery.

For day 3 I headed past Fraserburgh west along the north coast, to do a walk from Cullykhan Bay around Troup Head. Here, either I got the navigation wrong or my guidebook was out of date, as the coastal path as such hardly existed. The day started well after a local encouraged me to go onto the sand at Cullykhan, and through the 'needles eye,' a passage cave running right through a large headland.



You emerge on a rough rocky shore on the other side...

Rough is the theme for the rest of the walk, the path getting worse and worse, dense thistles and impenetrable gorse eventually forcing me to climb a barbed wire fence into the fields.

A shame because once again this route has fine views...





The highlight however is Troup Head, which is a small RSPB reserve giving close access to Scotland's only mainland gannetry. The reserve is free and there's a car park allowing you to go to the headland without any rough walking. The gannets fly really close and there are lots of them; and the nests can be viewed close up. Here you can see the chicks are pretty much full grown, with just a little of their dark feathers left.

In complete contrast to this day was my fourth and penultimate walk, on the Sands of Forvie national nature reserve. Carefully signposted and maintained paths made this the most relaxing walk of the trip, and in some ways it was the most varied. The reserve combines cliffs and

sandy bays with a monster beach and dune system leading eventually to the estuary of the River Ythan.

Wildlife included fulmars, curlews, lapwings, herons, toads – and seals. As many seals as I've ever seen, about 30 or so just floating like giant vertical sausages up the Ythan estuary letting the rising tide do the work. Fishing is evidently so good that there's no hurry and swimming is out of the question!



A recommended area

I'd recommend this area to anyone looking for somewhere different in Scotland. There's more here I didn't get to see – not least Aberdeen looks to have some interesting historic buildings, and there's a scatter of historic houses and other antiquities round about. Further coastal walking is not far away, including Arbroath where Brian and Mike Gilbert and I had a good day a few of years back.

(* End note – as of 2021 I am not sure if the hostel is still going; it's on Trip Advisor but the reviews don't look recent and it's not in the Independent Hostel Guide anymore. I would suggest you try to ring the number on Trip Advisor/make more enquiries)

3) High Cup Nick - by Chris Harris



Another idea for a walk away from the crowds of the Lake District is to High Cup Nick which we managed to walk in between lockdowns in 2020. The Walking Britain website shows what looks like a good circular walk, no. 1339



The village green in Dufton

High Cup Nick is a superb example of a U-shaped glacial valley. It is North of Appleby a pleasant town best avoided during the annual Horse Fair. Navigation is easy if you take the Pennine Way from Dufton and underfoot it is mostly bridleway. The Pennines are not known for their moderate climate and the head of the Nick is at about 1800ft so it can be a bit chilly up there especially if windy. It was cold in July.

There is plenty of parking around the village green but at the southern edge of the village near where the Pennine Way to the Nick starts is a small car park with toilets.



The shortest route is to follow the Pennine way from Dufton and from the top of the valley many drop down into the valley bottom to return. We saw a young under-equipped couple make the initial steep and stony descent which they seemed to achieve reasonably well.

As we had a misty climb without much in the way of views we retraced our outward journey which gave us excellent views. We clocked 8.8 miles and 1800ft ascent

To the East is the appropriately named Warcop firing range which you would be unlikely to stray into when it is in use, it's very noisy from afar.

4) Finally, I asked Pete Smedley say a few words about Mal Bonner.

In Memory of Mr Bonner

Died 13.04.21 aged 79

Mal was a member of the GMC for over 30 years. When I first met him he came bounding out of the Chapel in a t-shirt composed of more holes than thread. Mischief glistened in his eye - a measure of the man. Irons belonged on planet Mars.

He was a survivor to the last. In the early years he caved in South Wales with some prominent people like Martyn Farr. He was a member of the Alpine Club and had been benighted on a few occasions in challenging regions of the world. He even found a body in the ice on an expedition in Georgia with that same club. He could run down scree and balance in precarious situations. We would have fallen. He loved rock climbing and did so until Parkinson's Disease took hold. He was his own man and took risks.

He brought a smile to the face of most of us. He was an electrical Engineer and former college lecturer. We are well and truly depleted by the loss of this rare and even eccentric man. They do not mint characters like him anymore.

Goodbye Mal

Your affectionate friend

Peter Smedley (...the Colonel)