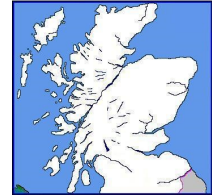


# Nor' West News



## The NeWSletter of the Nor' West Sgurramblers

Issue No. 173 – January 2018



### MEET REPORTS

**AUTUMN in the GRAMPIANS:** Meet No, 321 (Saturday 9 – Wednesday 13 September 2017).

The September Meet was split between two separate venues - Braemar youth hostel and a bunkhouse in Glen Prosen - the latter being well situated for me to bag two of my few remaining Corbetts. After picking David Douglas up from Stirling station we headed for Glen Clova for a planned afternoon ascent of Ben Tirran. As time was fairly limited, our route would be a straight up and down. On our rather ancient maps the route up was shown as just a path, whereas when we set off we found that a Landrover track had been bulldozed uphill as far as Loch Warral. Because the original track had been obliterated, we missed a junction leading to the path which would have taken us directly up our intended hill. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise as, on reaching Loch Warral, we found a bothy which



was not marked on either of our maps. This made a suitable spot for a belated lunch. The shelter was very welcome as the wind at that height was quite forceful. After eating we spent some time taking photos of the crags above it which made an impressive backdrop to the Loch. From there we made our way across trackless terrain to pick up the path we had missed earlier.

Eventually we reached a cairn which is marked on the map as Ben Tirran, although the highest point is a few hundred metres north-east where there is a trig point. We were lucky to be up there on such a bright, sunny, albeit rather windy day. The views to the west were extensive, including Mount Keen and Lochnagar. Shortly after arriving we were joined by another walker, rather casually dressed in shorts and wearing

trail shoes which seem to be becoming increasingly common as footwear on the hills. It turned out that he lived not far away in Brechin; and for him Ben Tirran was quite a short excursion from home.

The descent passed uneventfully and, after “de booting”, I was expecting a short drive to the bunkhouse in Glen Prosen. So I was rather confused when David suggested going to a chip shop instead of cooking a meal. A chip shop in Glen Prosen seemed rather unlikely! But it turned out that he meant a shop in Braemar as he had arranged for us to stay at the hostel there (not in Glen Prosen) for the first two nights of the Meet. It meant



quite a long drive but we enjoyed a fish supper at the Hungry Highlander in Braemar.

The forecast for the first full day of the Meet was truly dismal, threatening almost continuous rain. With this in mind we had a rather later than usual start, with no great enthusiasm for a day in the hills. Eventually we settled on what would be a short day climbing Creag Bhalg (a Graham) near the Linn of Dee. This was a first for me but not for David who had

climbed it on a Meet several years earlier. It was raining intermittently as we drove to the car park just past the Linn of Dee but, encouragingly, it had stopped by the time we left the car. We had about a mile of road walking before we took a badly overgrown path up the hillside. After crossing a forest road we continued on another, much better path. As we gradually gained height we had increasingly improving views of the surrounding hills which were mostly clear of cloud. Another track took us to within about 100m of the top of the mountain. Luckily, there was a path (not shown on the map) leading up the hill. Otherwise, we would have been wading through knee deep heather. Part way up we were surprised to see a small solar panel - no doubt supplying power for the Mar Lodge estate buildings down in the glen. Our luck with the weather continued and it remained dry as we reached the summit where we had views towards the huge bulk of Beinn a' Bhuid. And the rain kept off until we got back to the car and returned to Braemar where we spent a pleasant half hour browsing in the climbing shop.



David still had some energy to use up, so decided on an ascent of Creag Coinnich - a hill immediately above Braemar. I was not feeling so energetic and decided to spend the

time dozing in the car and listening to a drama on the radio. David's luck ran out with the weather as he got rained on during his walk.

There were some beaters staying in the hostel at the same time as us. As this was Sunday, there was no grouse shooting and it had been their day off. One of them had obviously been spending his wages in one of the local bars and was distinctly the worse for drink, making rather a nuisance of himself. Luckily this did not spoil our enjoyment of the meal that David prepared for us that evening. The only other person staying in our room was a man who had just completed a two day excursion through the Lairig Ghru. He seemed quite interested when I told him about the Sgurramblers, and he asked for our contact details – maybe a new member to increase our dwindling numbers?

For the next day of the Meet we decided to climb two Grahams that David had climbed previously but which were new to me – Mount Blair and Duchray Hill. According to the Graham guide book both could be ascended from the same point on the B591 where the road reached a height of over 1,000 feet. This would give us a useful altitude boost for our day's walk. We decided on Mount Blair as our first hill of the day, which meant finding a gate through the barbed wire fence. This we duly did and climbed the easy angled grass slopes. As is often the case, we managed to lose sight of each other part way up the hill. Not long after this happened I came across another barbed wire fence and, thinking that (maybe) David had found a way through this, I dropped down some distance and did indeed find a gate in the fence, with a good track leading to the top where I found David waiting for me. As well as a radio mast on top there was a sizeable cairn under which (supposedly) is buried a "suicide".



Having enjoyed the view of Duchray Hill in the distance, we returned to the road

where we found another gate from which a very rough, marshy descent led to yet another barbed wire fence. No gates were visible and it did not seem possible to get over it without risking torn trousers (or worse). Looking at the map we decided the best thing to do would be to drive a few miles down the road in order to make an ascent up Glen Beanie.

After parking the car again, we found the start of a path which our maps showed as passing through a group of buildings near the road. But, when we walked along it, we discovered it came to a dead end. This necessitated a retreat to the road, walking back to where the car was parked and going through a gate onto a Landrover track which was not shown on either of our ancient maps. (It is probably time for us to invest in some more up-to-date maps.) We left the track after about half a kilometre or so as we were keen to get to grips with the mountain. This was probably a mistake because we came across some of the roughest and most unpleasant terrain that I had encountered for quite a while. Eventually we reached a wall which we followed to the highest point. A few yards away from the highest point, on the other side of the wall, was a cairn which looked a fair bit lower than our current



position. But we thought we'd better visit it just to be on the safe side. As this exposed us to the full force of the wind, we stayed just long enough to touch the cairn then scurried back to a more sheltered position behind the wall where we paused very briefly to take pictures of Mount Blair. Happily, the showers stopped and the sun came out to make it a very pleasant autumn day as we descended the north ridge to pick up the track we had come in on.



Back in the car we drove to the bunkhouse at the end of Glen Prosen - a new one for both David and me. Looking on its website a few weeks before it had seemed a very smart place. We were not disappointed when we arrived there.

The building had been converted from an old school and had an open plan seating and kitchen area with a wood burning stove, and central heating. We were rather alarmed by a large German Shepherd dog that was roaming outside; but we relaxed when the only other person staying there told us that he had been assured by the bunkhouse owner that the dog was harmless. Our bunkhouse companion was planning an ascent of Dreish and Mayar the following day: we had our sights set on Mount Battock which had been David's final Corbett back in 2008. Originally I had thought about doing it from the north (as recommended in the Corbett guide book) because a variation of the ascent could be made by returning over Clachnaben. After looking at the map, we decided to forgo this in favour of a climb from Glen Esk, which would involve much less driving. The Wi Fi connection in the bunkhouse had a snail like speed and we were unable to get the latest weather forecast. But, assuming the forecast from the previous day had been accurate, we were in for a fine, settled day.

Even the shorter drive to Glen Esk was fairly lengthy: so we made an early start next day. The weather was the best we had had so far on the Meet, with plenty of sunshine and light winds. All the hills in this area are crisscrossed by all-terrain vehicle tracks designed to ease access to the higher ground by those who find it entertaining to blast away at



various game birds with their mind bogglingly expensive Purdeys. And Mount Battock was no exception to this. There was a well graded track which went as far as a subsidiary top from which a muddy path led to the highest point. Looking west there were distant views of the Cairngorms and Mount Keen. And in the east we could see the summit tor of Clachnaben.

David was especially grateful that we had clear views as there had been in thick mist on his previous

visit. We settled down next to the summit cairn where many spent cartridges provided evidence of the recent feathery slaughter that had taken place there. While I made inroads into my lunch David texted his father to let him know that we were on Mount Battock in clear weather - something that had been denied the Douglas clan when they were there for David's final Corbett. He received a text back asking him if he was enjoying his trip to the "Grumpians". It appears that Mr Douglas senior is not a big fan of the hills in this part of the Highlands.



We did consider returning by a different route but, when we saw from a distance the

large area of peat groughs we would have to negotiate, we decided to take the easy option and return the way we had come. After about an hour we met the only people we would see on the hill all day. The highlights of the views on the way down were those of the Hill of Wirren, a Graham that David had climbed a few years previously as part of his Graham bagging campaign.

That evening, while David prepared the evening meal of vegetable curry, I tried to light the wood burning stove. After struggling for 15 minutes or so to achieve any sort of reasonable fire, I gave up only for it to ignite spontaneously about 10 minutes later, producing a cheery glow for some considerable time and enough heat to dry out damp socks. That evening we had a different companion – a chap from Bilbao in Spain, who had been Munro bagging in the Cairngorms. Fortunately, he spoke very passable English as he had spent some time living in England. So I was able to discuss a number of areas in the Pyrenees that we had both visited. We agreed that we had found the Refuge des Sarradets near the Breche de Roland to be in a very spectacular position but to have had awful sleeping quarters where some 30 people were crammed into a space hardly big enough for a third that number.



Normally, on the last day of a Meet we would have climbed a hill on our way home. But I had to forego this as I wanted to get back for my mother's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations.

My thanks to David for his company, for his catering skills, and for getting me back on track during the driving when "SATNAV woman" had lost the plot.

Chris Knowles



## **ALNWICK:** Meet no. 322 (Friday 13 – Sunday 15 October 2017)



This year's AGM was held in Alnwick hostel in Northumberland, deviating from the normal Wales/Lake district/Yorkshire Dales choice of venue. The Northumberland hills are a part of the world I had never been to before and I was looking forward to an excursion to climb the Cheviot, the highest hill in the area. I was also looking forward to the picturesque drive through remote Cumbrian hill country, over roads which reach almost 2,000ft near Alston. Unfortunately low cloud and intermittent rain meant that I had no decent views on this trip.

When I arrived at Alnwick hostel, I found that Brian Billington, Paul Cassell, Chris Horne, and Roger Reeves had got there before me. Roger had bagged a local Marilyn en route. There followed a trip to the pub and the chip shop by some members. David and Kerina Cheesman arrived shortly before 9pm.

Next morning, the cloud level was very low but five of us agreed that we would climb The Cheviot. Paul had decided to visit Alnwick Castle. Our walk necessitated a drive of nearly 20 miles to the start of the excursion, down ever narrowing roads, one of which involved going through a ford. Getting out of the car we were greeted by persistent drizzle prompting some of us, including me, to put on waterproof overtrousers at once. Others of a more optimistic inclination decided not to, expecting the weather to improve. The first mile or so of the path provided some very pleasant walking up the steep sided valley between Hedgehope Hill and The Cheviot. After crossing a stile the nature of the walk changed and we found ourselves on a very vague and sometimes completely non-existent path. There is a path shown on the 1:50,000 map but often this seemed to be a product of the cartographer's imagination. We had to cross the stream running up the valley on numerous occasions. I am not sure how many as I lost count after the first ten. Luckily, it was quite a narrow water course, and I managed to avoid getting wet feet, although I was glad to have Goretex lined boots.

We used a GPS to figure out exactly where we were in the valley and, having done this, we decided to have a lunch break foreseeing that, once we got on to higher, more exposed ground, we would probably struggle to find a suitably sheltered spot. At this point we met a group coming the other way, the only other people we saw on the hill all day – probably not surprising considering the miserable weather. Eventually we reached the end of the stream and picked up a better defined path to a point named on my map as "Scotsman's Knowe". Then we followed quite a steep path to Cairn Hill and onto the Pennine Way with a paved pathway for about a kilometre to the top of The Cheviot. This was not the most enjoyable route; but, no doubt, the alternative would have been wading through ankle deep bog, which would have been far worse. At various points there were pools of water of indeterminate depth on either side of the path. Slipping off the paving stones into one of these did not bear contemplating. Eventually the trig point appeared, looming out of the clag. The top of the trig point was about 8 feet off the ground as it was

perched on top of a sizeable plinth. I took my camera out of my rucksack, for the first and



last time that day, to get a group summit photo. Brian was particularly pleased to climb this hill as he had missed out on it many years previously (when doing the Pennine Way) because the long distance route did not go to the top of The Cheviot at that time.

The paved path continued for about another half mile on our descent route towards Scald Hill where it was replaced by the usual boggy track we were more accustomed to. At this point we had finally come out of the clag.

On reaching the top of Scald Hill we had to decide whether to descend directly to the valley on a permissive path or continue along the ridge and then take another permissive path, which would take us to within a short distance of our start point. The majority decision was to opt for the latter. This path gradually improved as we got nearer to the valley – the last half mile or so being almost dry. The walk had taken a surprisingly long time considering that it was no great distance, although walking conditions were far from ideal.

The evening meal at the hostel was followed by the AGM. At the AGM, after the following year's Meets were planned, there was a discussion about how to attract more members to boost our dwindling numbers. The evening was rounded off by viewing some of Brian's photos from Meets earlier in the year.

Only Kerina, David and I were left on the second day of the Meet. So the three of us decided on a coastal walk – one of the recommended walks posted up in the hostel foyer. Our walk was on part of the 62 mile Northumberland coastal path. We would be doing a more manageable four miles or so of the path although, as we had to return to our start point, we would be walking about eight miles in total. We took only one car which we left near the village of Howick, planning to walk as far as Embleton. It appeared that the weather was going to be kinder to us than on the previous day, with no rain forecast and even some sun. Along the first section of the path we were treated to some spectacular cliff scenery. In places the rocks had been twisted and contorted into some most unusual shapes. The walking was a pleasant change from yesterday's rough and boggy terrain, with a very well constructed path, and was obviously a popular route for local dog walkers. After a mile or so the scenery became much tamer until, eventually, the path turned inland to the small village of Craster where we noted the presence of The Jolly Fisherman pub and decided we would visit it for refreshments on the return leg of the walk.



After leaving the village, the path once more returned to the coast. In the distance we could see the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle. As we got closer it was evident that huge



chunks of masonry were missing, and parts of it looked as though they were about to tumble down at any moment. But, considering that the structure had been pounded by the elements since 1322, it was probably not doing too badly. The path took us past the entrance to the castle, where an information board informed us that it had been built by Earl Thomas of Lancaster who had come to a sticky end when he was executed following the battle of Boroughbridge, having been captured by royal forces as he

fled for the sanctuary of his castle. As we were not willing to pay the £5 entrance fee, we continued our walk past the castle towards Embleton.

The next part of our walk involved going through a golf course, and we had to pause on occasions while various golfers whacked their balls from one part of the course to another. Eventually we reached the end of the golf course without sustaining any injuries and we turned inland to reach the village of Embleton. From there we followed a path which ran more or less parallel to the coast path until we came to Craster again, making a bee-line for the Jolly Fisherman for a welcome drink. It proved to be an exceptionally popular watering hole, and we were forced to find a seat outside the pub premises. Leaving the inn, we followed our outward route back to the car and thence to Alnwick. From there David and Kerina were travelling to a nearby village where they had a holiday cottage booked for a few days. My journey home took much longer than expected, due to the closure of the M6 not far from Carnforth.

All in all it was a very enjoyable weekend despite the less than perfect weather. Thanks go to David and Kerina for their organizational skills.

Chris Knowles

### FORTHCOMING MEETS

The provisional programme of Meets for 2018 is included in the Minutes of the 2017 AGM. The latest available details of the first five Meets are given below.

#### **MEET No 323: Southern Uplands**

Dates: Saturday 6 – Sunday 14 January 2018.

Area: Southern Uplands.

Accommodation: Please consult the Meet organiser.

Programme: An opportunity to climb a variety of enjoyable hills when they are snow-capped.



Transport: If coming by car, please advise the Meet organiser how many passengers you can take and your approximate route and time of journey.

Maps: Consult the Meet organiser for advice.

Equipment: **Crampons and ice axe essential.**

Food: Will be provided by the Meet organiser, unless requested otherwise, from breakfast on the first Saturday to breakfast on the last Saturday.

Bookings: **Please contact the Meet organiser as soon as possible to find out whether any places are still available.**

Meet Organiser: David Douglas.

### **MEET No 324: Killin**

Dates: Saturday 17 – Wednesday 21 February 2018.

Area: Southern Highlands.

Accommodation: Holiday let in Killin. One place was still available at last check.

Programme: An area of relatively straightforward mountains which are attractive when snow covered.

Transport: If coming by car, please advise the Meet organiser how many passengers you can take and your approximate route and time of journey.

Maps: Consult the Meet organiser for advice.

Equipment: **Crampons and ice axe essential.**

Bookings: **Please contact the Meet organiser as soon as possible to find out whether any places are still available.**

Meet Organiser: Chris Knowles

### **MEET No 325: Pitlochry**

Area: Central Highlands.

Area: Dates: Friday 30 March – Wednesday 4 April 2018.

Accommodation: Pitlochry youth hostel, already booked.

Programme: There are a number of more testing mountains in this area and some are likely to still be snow-capped.

Transport: If coming by car, please advise the Meet organiser how many passengers you can take and your approximate route and time of journey.

Maps: Consult the Meet organiser for advice.

Equipment: **Check before journeying whether it is advisable to bring crampons and an ice axe.**

Bookings: **Please contact the Meet organiser as soon as possible to find out what places are still available.**

Meet Organiser: Chris Knowles

### **MEET No 326: North West Highlands**

Dates: Saturday 19 – Saturday 26 May 2018.

Area: North West Highlands.

Accommodation: Self catering cottage near Ullapool. Number of places limited to 8.

Programme: A great many and variety of mountains are accessible from Ullapool, and even more on the way to and from the main accommodation.

Transport: If coming by car, please advise the Meet organiser how many passengers you can take and your approximate route and time of journey.

Maps: Consult the Meet organiser for advice.

Food: Will be provided by the Meet organiser, unless requested otherwise, from an evening meal on the first Saturday to breakfast on the last Saturday.

Bookings: To reserve a place, please contact the Meet organiser **as soon as possible**. Some places have already been booked.

Meet organiser: David Douglas.

### **MEET No 327: North East Highlands**

Dates: Saturday 30 June – Saturday 7 July 2018.

Area: North East Highlands.

Accommodation: Helmsdale Hostel.

Programme: A large number of popular and other attractive but seldom visited hills in the far north east will be accessible. A bike would be useful on some of the longer mountain tracks leading to the more remote hills.

Transport: If coming by car, please advise the Meet organiser how many passengers you can take and your approximate route and time of journey.

Maps: Consult the Meet organiser for advice.

Food: Will be provided by the Meet organiser, unless requested otherwise, from an evening meal on the first Saturday to breakfast on the last Saturday.

Bookings: Please contact the Meet organiser who will attempt to obtain places in respect of requests received up to **31 January**.

Meet organiser: David Douglas.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

We welcome two new members – Rob Sturgess and Val Bailey.

A revised **membership list** containing the latest detailed information will be circulated separately.

**Subscriptions** for 2018 are unchanged at **£15** per person (see AGM Minutes) and are now **due**.

**Membership numbers** have been dwindling slowly in recent years and, because there has been a poor response to advertising for new members via the BMC website, affiliation has been transferred to “Mountaineering Scotland” (formerly known as the “Mountaineering Council of Scotland”). It is too early to assess whether this will be more effective in attracting new members.

In addition, Norwest Sgurramblers hill walking club was registered as a “group” on **Face Book** very recently. It remains to be seen whether this will attract significant interest.

**So it important to explore further measures to acquire a small but steady flow of new members. To that end, , it would be helpful if all current members would make a personal effort both to find a way to display an advertising poster - Chris Knowles can provide copies - AND to take all other practical measures to interest friends, colleagues and people in their communities in joining NWS.**

**When seeking new members it may be helpful to explain that:**

- a. Members are encouraged to inform a committee member, before each annual Meet programme is determined, which areas and hills they wish to visit so that formal dates and locations provide (as far as possible) the opportunities they desire.
- b. Members are encouraged to discuss their preferences with the nominated Meet organiser before deciding whether to attend a Meet.
- c. Those attending a Meet are free to walk where they please and with whom they please (or alone, if they prefer) during the Meet.
- d. Members are encouraged to contact each other directly to arrange to walk together at times and in places outside the formal programme. [The NeWSletter editor suggests that news of these more independent activities would be of potential interest to all members and would be pleased to include accounts of such trips in NeWSletters.]
- e. It is open to individuals to attend a Meet before deciding whether to become a member.

**Wishing you an enjoyable New Year and  
another successful year of hill walking**